

Appreciating the superstar next door

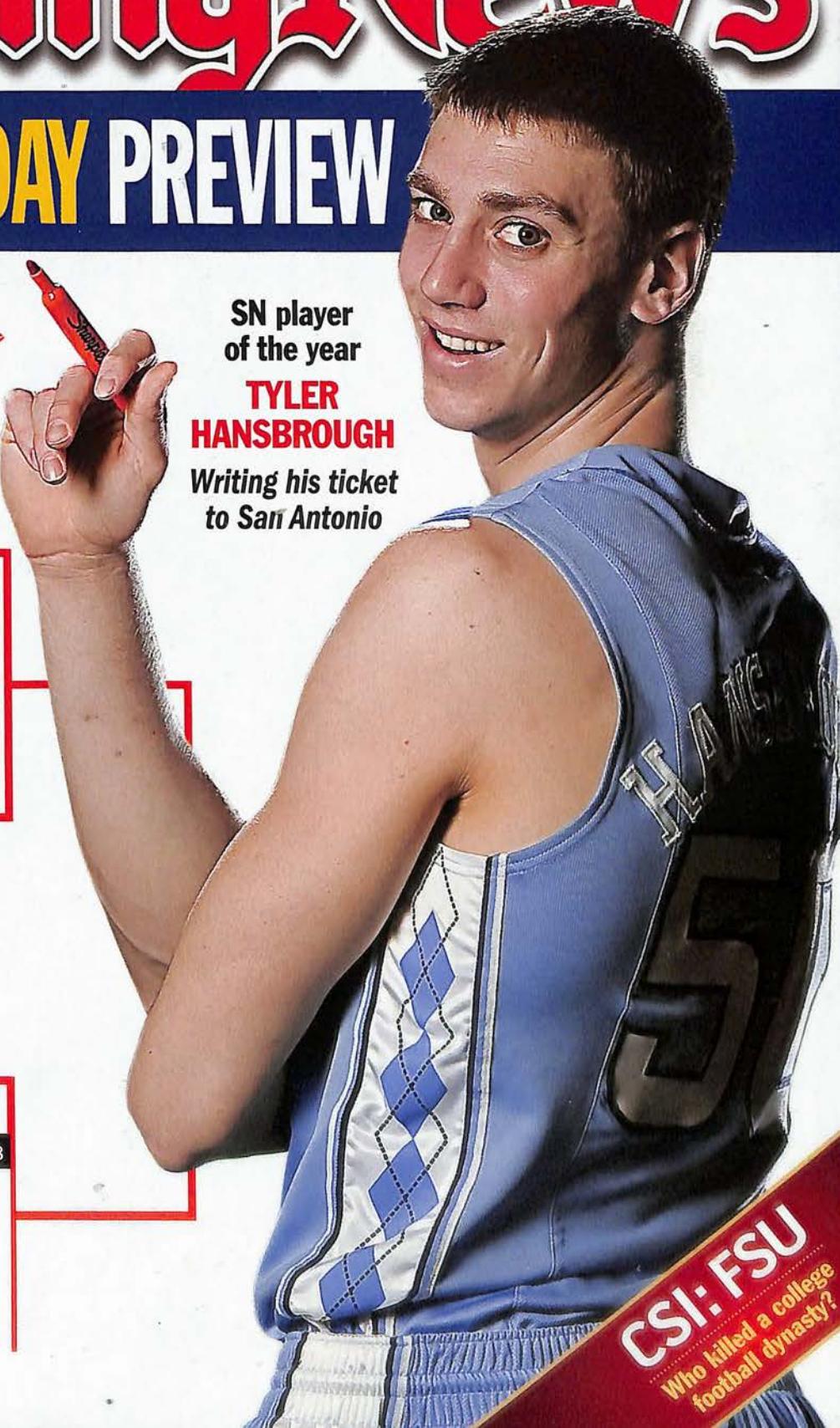
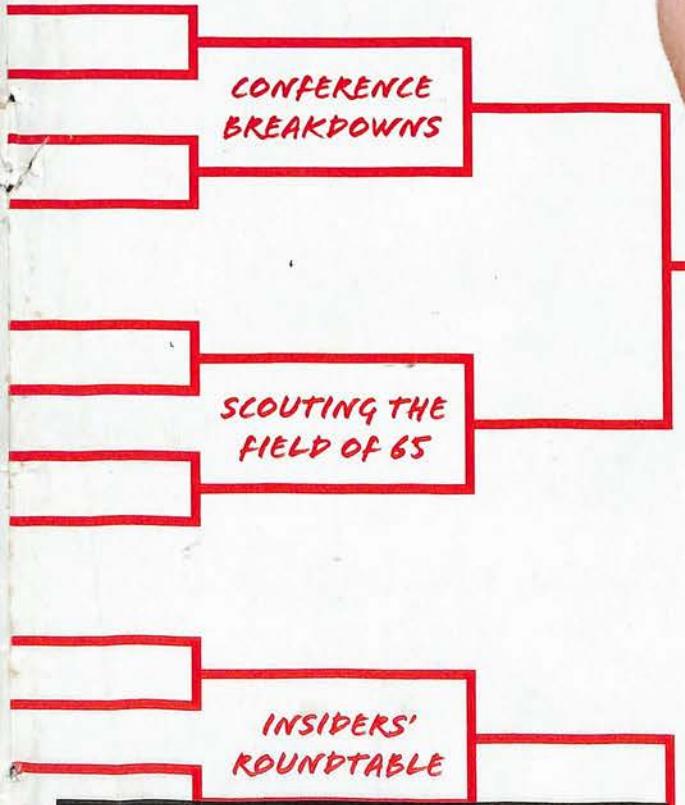
SEE A DIFFERENT GAME



Sporting News

SELECTION SUNDAY PREVIEW

HOW'S YOUR
BRACKET?



SN player
of the year

TYLER
HANSBROUGH

Writing his ticket
to San Antonio

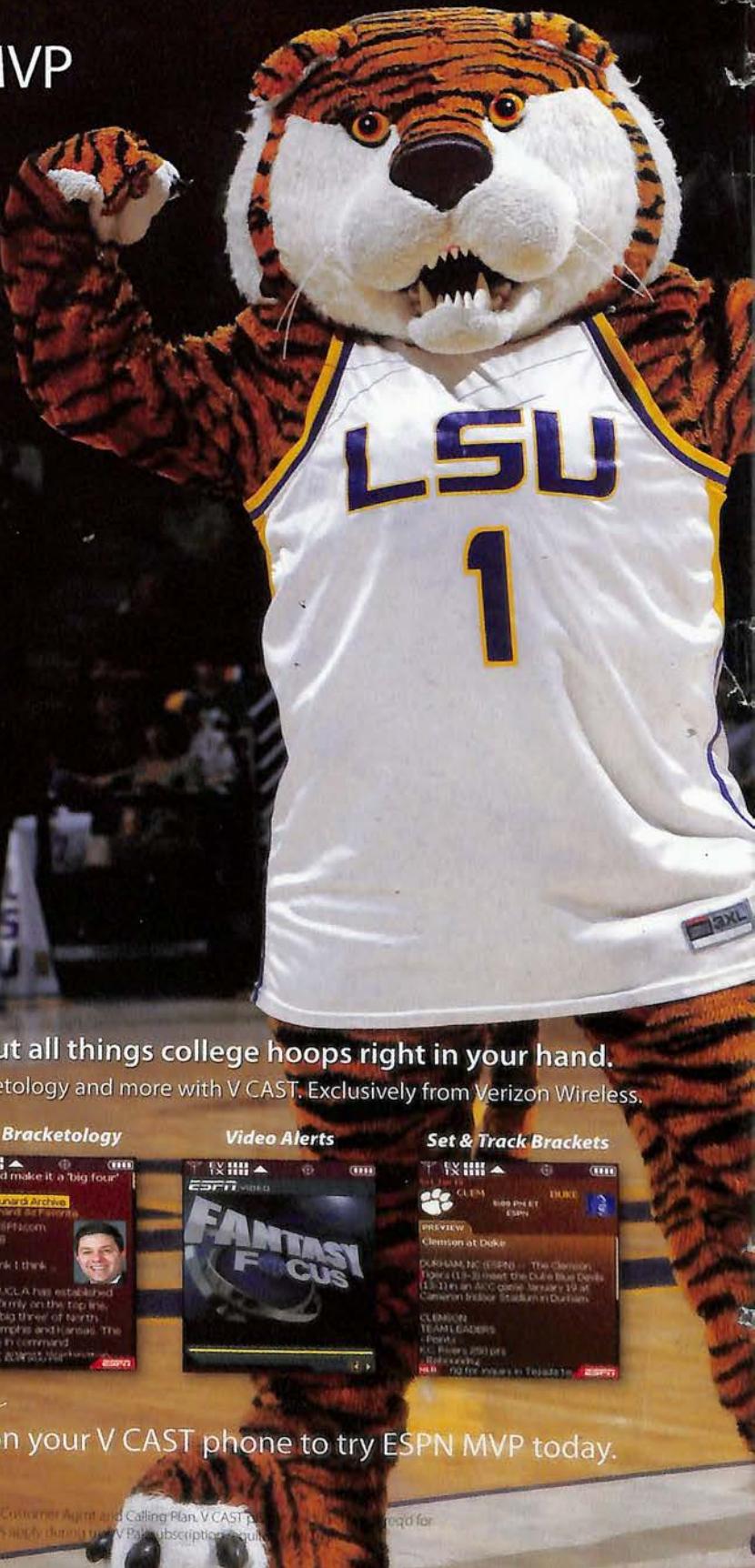
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Week of March 17, 2008

CSI: FSU
Who killed a college
football dynasty?



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Distracting North Carolina's Deon Thompson was hard, but things outside the arena were even tougher for the Cameron Crazies.

> NFL

12 The quarterback next door

Brett Favre's skills made him a star. His regular-guy persona and love of the game made him a legend. *By Dennis Dillon*

> BASEBALL

14 Living in the moment

You want 'truly defining'? Rockies manager Clint Hurdle finds it in an eight-game losing streak, a phenom tag gone amiss, the companionship of a dying 15-year-old ... and whatever else a challenging life throws his way. *By Bob Hille*

> COLLEGE FOOTBALL

20 A legend before the fall

The problem with near perfection is that it makes anything less look like failure. Florida State and Bobby Bowden understand just how fickle success really is. *By Tom Dienhart*

COVER STORY

> SELECTION SUNDAY PREVIEW

26 The big picture

That dude hogging the road to San Antonio? That's UNC's Tyler Hansbrough, and he wants an NCAA title. Really bad. *By Mike DeCourcy* Plus, our take on the field of 65, five difference-making players and major and mid-major conference hopefuls.

THIS WEEK

SportingNews
MAGAZINE

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- 2 **To Know List** College basketball's Big Dance is so much more than a glass slipper fantasy.
- 5 **On Deck** Selection Sunday madness and LeBron vs. the Pistons. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 6 **Your Turn** The Patriots, Brett Favre and some good old Hoosier pride.
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COVER PHOTO by Bob Leverone

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

TO KNOW LIST

6 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

1 It's the most wonderful time of the year

A glass slipper makes as much sense, in theory, on grass as it does on the hardwood. And so the Boise States, Colorado Rockies and New York Giants stir our Cinderella affections in quite the same manner as Jim Valvano and North Carolina State did 25 years ago.

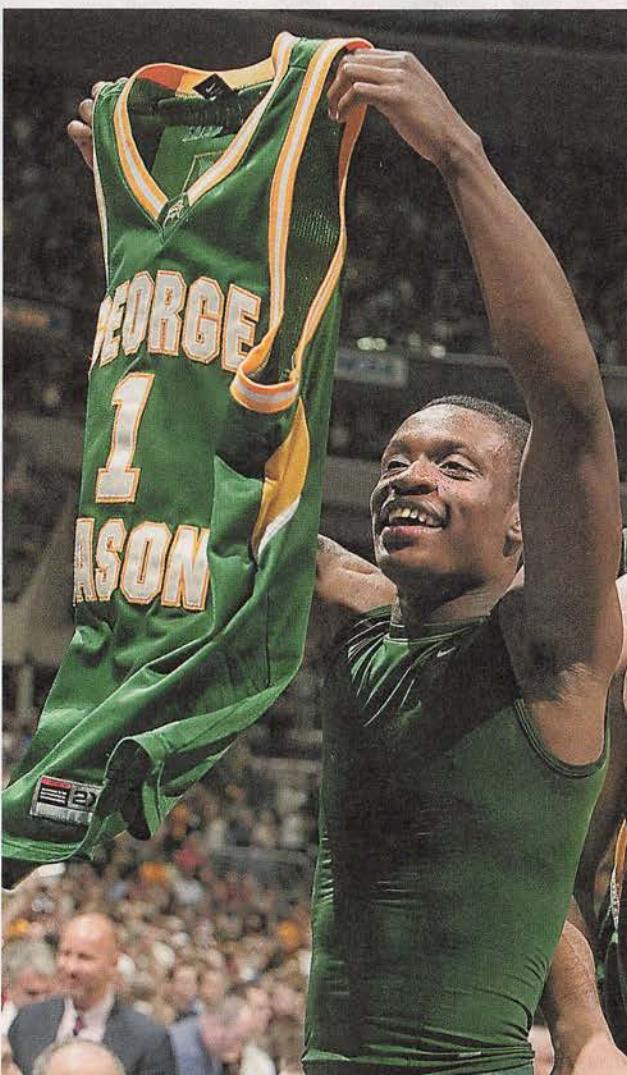
No, the underdog thing is not what makes college basketball's postseason so one-of-a-kind wonderful. The best things about it:

■ **Selection Sunday.** Any halfwit can look at the standings in other sports and figure out who's going to play whom in the playoffs. But it takes a Jim Nantz to tell 65 teams and their legions of Hotwiring fans what time zone they'll be in for Round 1 of the NCAA Tournament, let alone which opponent they'll get to beat in Round 2 and beyond.

■ **The first round.** You want prime time? There's no primer time on the national sports calendar than noon ET on the third Thursday in March. You'll never experience a higher high as a fan than the one you get by cheating the man—lunch at the sports bar, anyone?—and chucking your productivity out the office window.

■ **OK, fine, the underdog thing.** You don't have to walk among the hoops cognoscenti to know there's something about being a No. 12 seed that portends success in the tourney. Eventually, even a No. 16 seed will learn what it's like to survive and advance. When that happens, it will be the biggest upset ever—no hyperbole necessary—because a 16 beating a 1 has never happened.

Who knows? Maybe this is the year. And if it is, bosses be damned, you be sure to grab the hands of your nearest co-worker and dance. —Steve Greenberg



Tony Skinn and George Mason (remember which one is the name of the school?) shook up the world in 2006.

2

SEVEN UP
Shining
moments

Since the field went from 32 to 64 in 1985:

7 **Chattanooga, 1997.** Chattanooga-noogy bang! bang! Two huge upsets on the way to the Sweet 16.

6 **Richmond, 1991.** Four 15 seeds have won a tourney game, but the Spiders did it first.

5 **Valparaiso, 1998.** Bryce Drew's buzzer beater in Round 1 was so awesome that many people forgot the Crusaders won a second game.

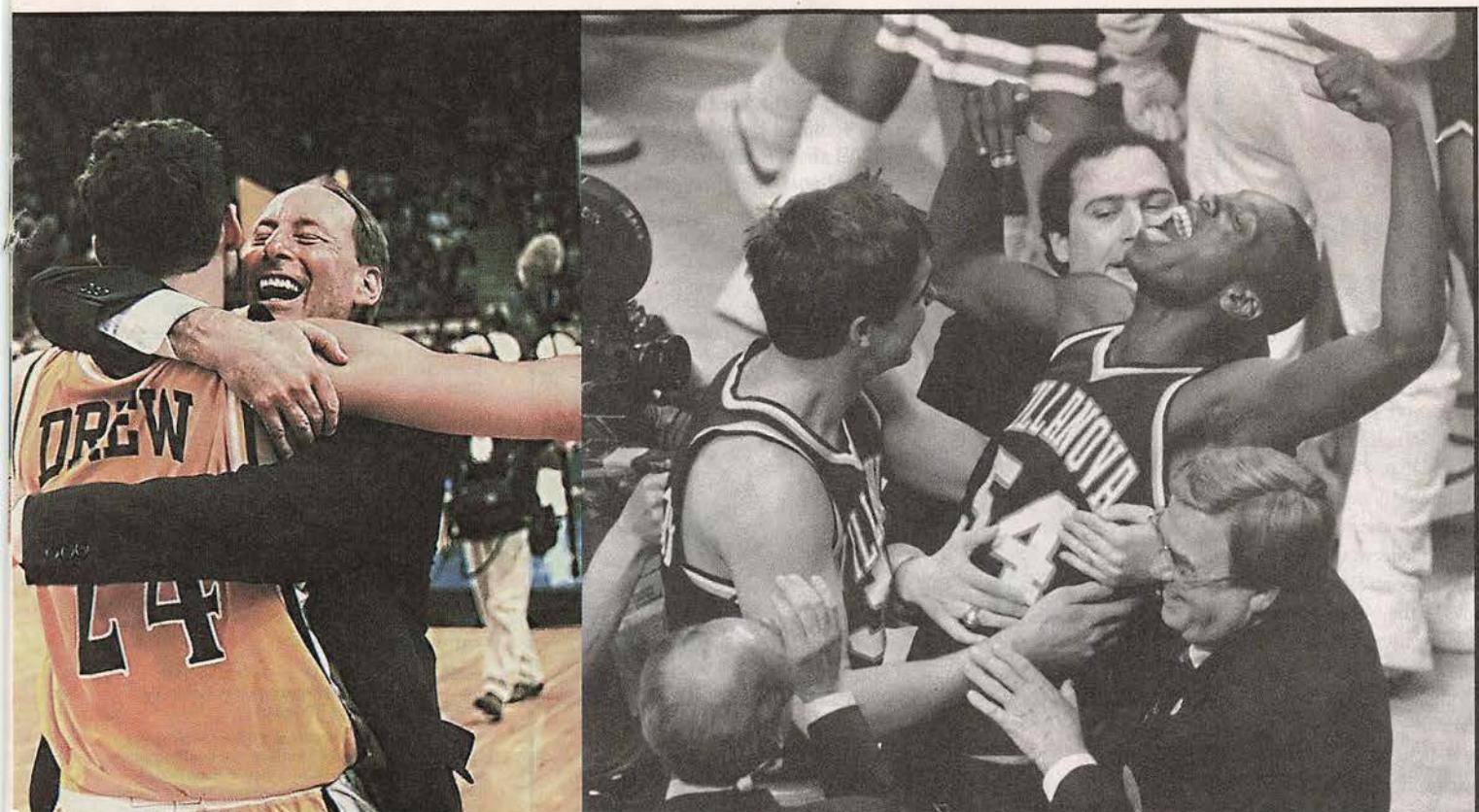
4 **Gonzaga, 1999.** Its Elite Eight run came before most of us realized the Bulldogs didn't zog, they zagged.

3 **Loyola Marymount, 1990.** Without their fallen star, the Lions won three games and gave us an unforgettable 149-115 win over Michigan.

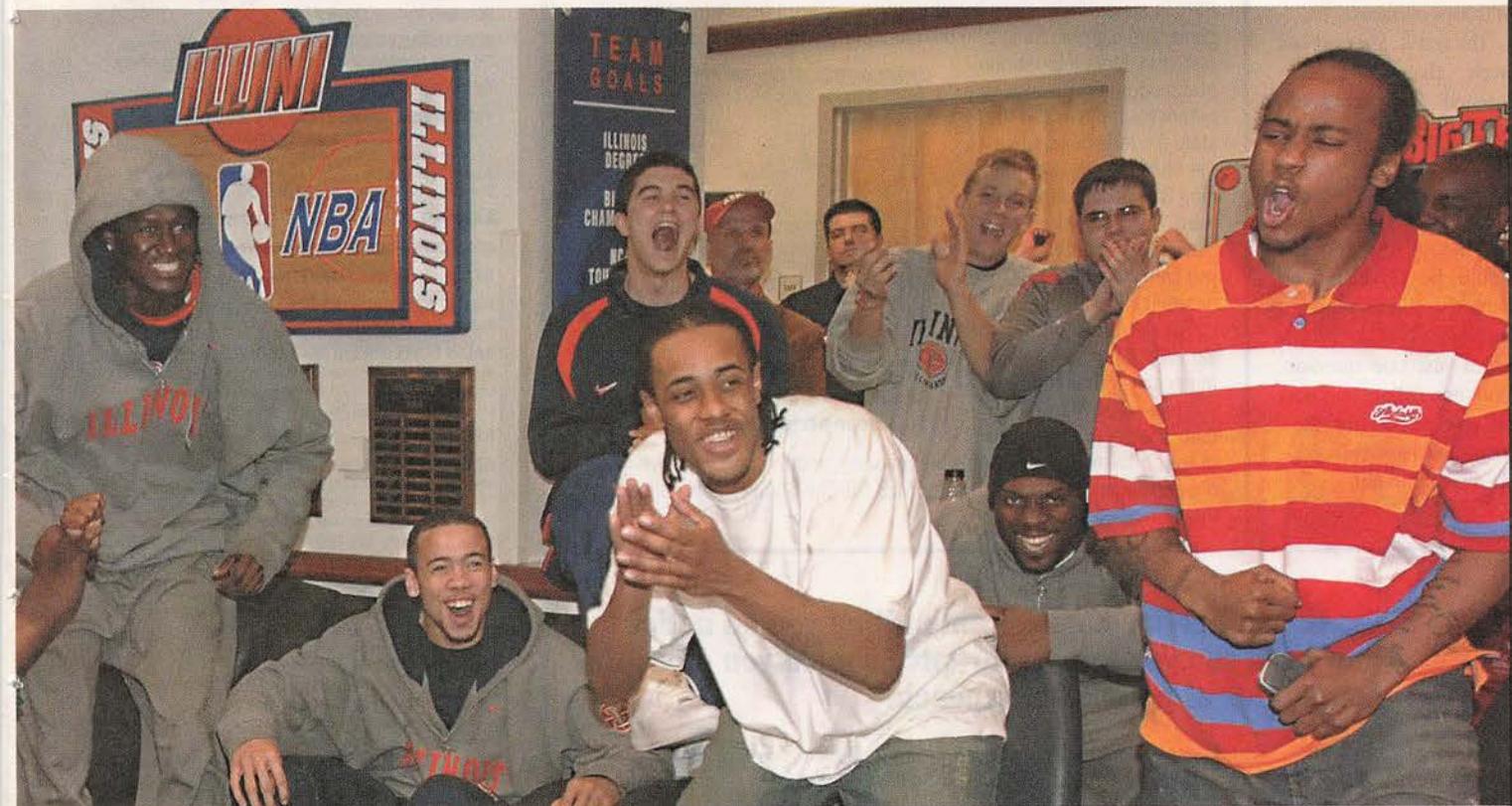
2 **George Mason, 2006.** Final Four, here we come! No, really! See? You thought we were kidding.

1 **Villanova, 1985.** Take that, mighty Hoyas. Twenty-three years later, it's still gotta hurt. —S.G.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



The Drews' father-son moment for Valpo and Villanova's amazing win over Georgetown will live on pretty much forever.



The Selection Sunday announcements are anything but a formality—and the reactions they elicit, like Illinois' last year, are truly priceless.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN GAPS II / AP; GARY LANDERS / AP; MARK JONES / UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

3

TELEVISION

**They'll leave
Lights on
for you**

Never underestimate the power of a rabid fan base. When rumors surfaced that the critically acclaimed high school football drama *Friday Night Lights* would be canceled because of low ratings, the show's fans sprung into action, sending almost 20,000 mini- footballs to NBC executives in protest. Fans also sent light bulbs to NBC's offices, donated money to charities on behalf of the show and had *Friday Night Lights* DVD sets delivered to troops overseas.

The result: a report last week that NBC has reached an agreement with DirecTV to share broadcasting rights, which would keep the show on the air for a third season after all. (New episodes would be broadcast on DirecTV, then repeated later on NBC.) Which leaves just one question: Will the Dillon Panthers be able to defend their state title? Now we'll get a chance to find out.

—Tricia Garner

4

CULTURE CLASH

It may look like something cleared off the track after a crash, but take our word for it, it's art. Steve Maloney's sculpted takes on Daytona car parts and NASCAR sheet metal will be on display at Daytona International Speedway until April 1.



5

VIDEO GAMES

**The only thing it doesn't give
you is grass stains**

The makers of **MLB 08: The Show** (\$59.99, PlayStation 3; \$39.99, PSP; in stores) have given it a shelf life never seen before in a baseball game. The biggest changes in the gameplay come in the pitcher-batter matchup. More information about opponents is available before each pitch, and the stats are incredible. Once the ball is in play, baserunning is relatively straightforward. The fun comes on close plays, during which you can choose from 10 different sliding techniques.

The only problem with the game is that pitching is much easier than hitting. If you play on any level other than Rookie, you'll struggle to get on base. But the visuals are amazing, and the players look like doppelgangers of their real selves. **MLB 08: The Show** is definitely worth the money. —Brian Powell



MLB 08: The Show has taken
the pitcher-batter matchup
to a near-perfect level.

6

IT BEARS REPEATING

**'As Coach Karl's counsel, I am putting you on notice
that I will sue you into bankruptcy should you cross the
boundaries of permissible speech.'**

—George Karl's attorney, Bret Adams, in a perhaps ill-advised e-mail to the founder of the website FireGeorgeKarl.com. The e-mail, which Karl says he did not authorize, quickly circulated around the Internet last week.

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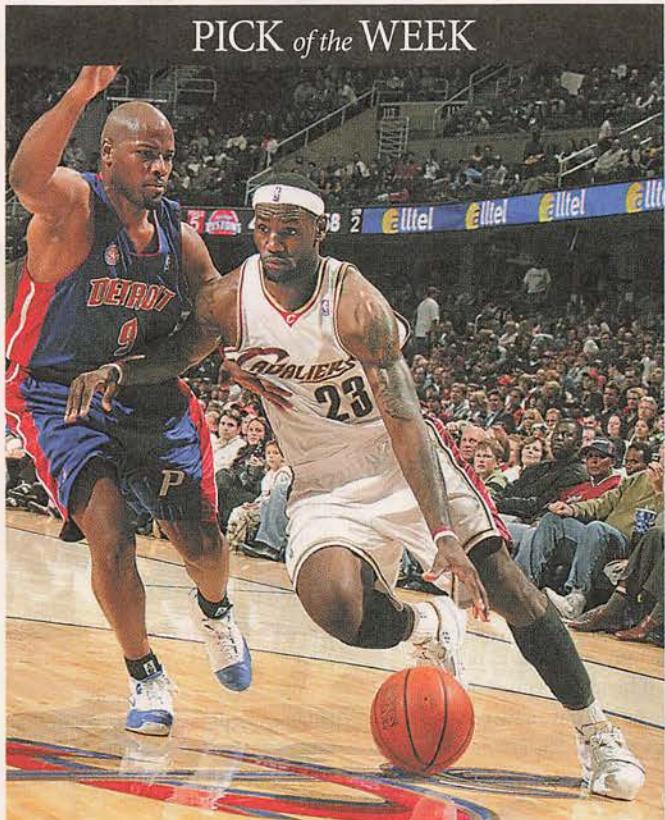
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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

ON DECK

All times Eastern

>>>>>> The week ahead in sports



PICK of the WEEK

WED 19

Pistons at Cavaliers (8 p.m., ESPN). It sure was amazing, what **LeBron James** did to heavily favored Detroit in the 2007 playoffs. Perhaps for his next trick he can sucker the Pistons into a trade for Ben Wallace.

SAT 15 **Pros vs. Joes** (11 a.m., Spike).

You want to feel better about yourself? Tune in for an original episode starring Brady Anderson and Jeff George, whose honest-to-God commitment to excellence you could beat on your worst day.

SUN 16 From top seeds to broken hearts, nothing beats the drama of the **Selection Sunday show** on CBS (6 p.m. ET). Until, that is, your ill-fated NCAA Tournament brackets go bustity-bust.

MON 17 The **NCAA women's selection special** is at 7 p.m. on ESPN. You know the drill: Connecticut, Tennessee, Rutgers and a whole bunch of teams noted analyst Don Imus simply underrates.

THU 20 It's a competitive heyday for the NBA whether you appreciate it or not, as **Celtics at Mavericks** and **Lakers at Jazz** (8 and 10:30 p.m., TNT) demonstrate. What, you'd rather have the 82-0 Patriots? —Steve Greenberg

BOB HILLE'S STARTING 5

1 Selection Sunday.

It's like Christmas morning for college hoops fans—except the guy in the next cubicle has never once asked me on December 26 if I had Comet, Cupid, Donner or Blitzen going all the way to San Antonio.

2 The Packers. I don't want to say there's a shoes-to-fill syndrome, but Aaron Rodgers has already announced that his name actually is pronounced "Rordges."

3 Dodgertown. It's sad that Vero Beach is bidding farewell to the Dodgers. Almost as sad as the Dodgers thinking they're contenders.

4 NFL free agents. Man, cash is getting thrown around at questionable candidates like there's a government contract at stake.

5 Carl Edwards. His team got whacked for cheating, something to do with his car's oil tank cover being left open. Apparently NASCAR didn't buy the "must've been the kid at Jiffy Lube" defense.

Livin' the Low Life
Hosted by Vida Guerra

SPEED

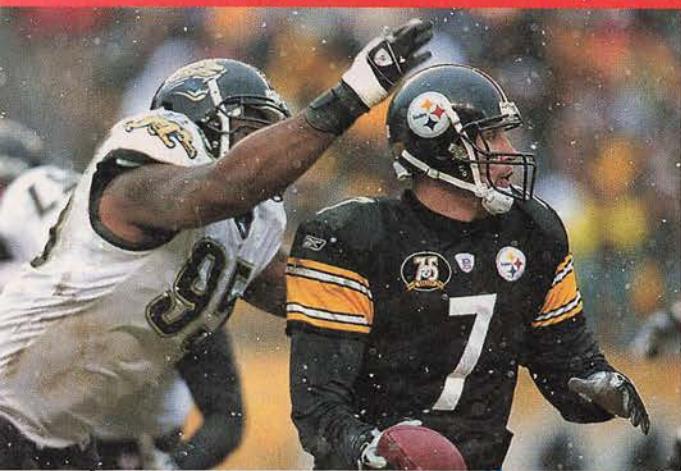
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YOUR TURN

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■ I don't blame Asante Samuel for taking the money. But if he thinks he'll have the same success on the field, he's sadly mistaken. It's a rare case when someone leaves the Patriots and becomes better. —*TageRyche via SportingNews.com*

■ The Pats are the best fit for Randy Moss. He's going to get a ton of balls and the Pats will continue to win, so he'll be happy. —*JBonnett via SportingNews.com*

■ As a Hoosier and a huge basketball fan, the postcards from Indiana (SN, March 3) really made me smile. Even with what's going on at IU and even with the Colts making us a temporary football state, our roots can always be found by the hoops in our driveways and back yards. —*oobadnama via SportingNews.com*

■ In the end, no one remembers who was ranked where during the season (SN, March 3). Bruce Pearl just needs to get his Vols to the Final Four. —*knotmeister via SportingNews.com*

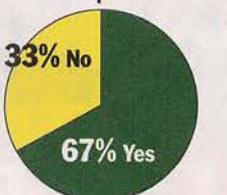
■ This is very simple. I love Joe Paterno, but the fact is, 81 years old is very, very old. Playing for JoePa nowadays is not the same as it was 15 or 20 years ago (SN, March 3). If he loves Penn State as much as we all do, I'm sure he will have a successor in place by the end of this year. —*PSULatino via SportingNews.com*

■ You forgot to add Bill Belichick to your list of repeat offenders (SN, March 3). He taped teams for over eight years. And when Spygate is over, his career and the so-called Patriots' dynasty will be, too. —*Andrew Schmitz via e-mail*

POLLING PLACE

Did Brett Favre make the right decision to retire?

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BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: PUTTING ON THE BRAKES

Posted by *rayrayballer*

So, Phoenix fans, how's that Shaquille O'Neal-Shawn Marion deal treating you? On paper, that deal might have made sense in Steve Kerr's twisted mind, but really, it didn't help the Suns much at all. Adding Shaq has slowed down their offense like a fresh pair of Callahan brake pads on a Cadillac.

RE: FAULTY LOGIC

Posted by *Flashjeff*

The Phillies' front office flushed millions down the drain on the likes of Freddy Garcia, Adam Eaton, Rod Barajas and Wes Helms while pinching pennies on the greatest slugger to come out of the Phillies' farm system since Mike Schmidt. Please explain to me how that makes sense.

RE: MR. UNPOPULAR

Posted by *A.J.512*

Tribune Co. chairman Sam Zell is about as popular in the Windy City as Steve Bartman right now. At the rate Zell is going, the only name change rabid Cubs fans will approve of is the Sam Zell Memorial Field.

RADIO STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Brett Favre was just a big kid who loved to play football. He could pass and run an offense as well as any quarterback, but more important, he was having fun, and that just made him even more fun to watch.' —*Justin in Lacrosse, Wis., on the Tim Brando Show*

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



2008 COLLEGE BASKETBALL AWARDS

The great debate

Two guys, two awards, two sensible choices



Player of the year

Tyler Hansbrough, North Carolina

It required no study, no analysis, no agony to select Kansas State's Michael Beasley over North Carolina's Tyler Hansbrough for SPORTING NEWS freshman of the year.

Beasley is a freshman. Hansbrough is not.

Done deal.

They're both players, though, whether you view that term as a simple noun or with the appropriate italicized emphasis: Beasley is a *player*; Hansbrough is a *player*. So choosing between the two for SPORTING NEWS player of the year was not easy. In the end, though, Hansbrough earned the award that makes him a successor to Texas' Kevin Durant, Jameer Nelson of Saint Joseph's, Purdue's Glenn Robinson and so many other great collegians.

Beasley is an astonishing shot-maker for a player his size—6-10, 235—and his ravenous hands led to some obscene rebounding totals. However, Hansbrough got the edge for a number of reasons.

Impact. When UNC point guard Ty Lawson

Freshman of the year

Michael Beasley, Kansas State

was out almost a month with an ankle injury, Hansbrough's job should have become harder. But he averaged 29.0 points to propel the Tar Heels to a 5-1 record during that stretch—up more than seven points from what he had been averaging.

Leadership. Hansbrough is not a vocal player, but his extraordinary effort level makes him, in coach Roy Williams' estimation, an exceptional leader by example.

Big games. Hansbrough showed up for every important game the Heels played, averaging 22.7 points and 11.9 rebounds in their nine games against top 50 RPI teams. When he failed to reach 20 points in four of those games, Hansbrough elevated his production on the boards, averaging 13.5.

Success. North Carolina owns a 29-2 record to Kansas State's 20-10. Team success is a component in any individual player award. If it weren't, Paul Hornung would not be the only Heisman Trophy winner from a losing team.

Coach of the year

Keno Davis, Drake

When Keno Davis took over for his father, Tom, as Drake's head coach after the 2007 season, the roster included two of the top five scorers from a team that finished 6-12 in the Missouri Valley Conference. If that didn't portend a league title, a top 25 ranking and certain NCAA Tournament bid, what would?

The Bulldogs were picked to finish ninth in the Valley but clinched the title with two weeks left. Using a spread-the-court style emphasizing teamwork and perimeter shooting, they earned a road win at Butler and, at one point, rode a 21-game winning streak.

In the SPORTING NEWS college basketball yearbook, Tony Jimenez wrote "filling his father's shoes and working with the scattered pieces left behind" would be a "monumental task" for Davis.

A monumental task—and a monumental achievement. Sounds about right.



SN All-Americans

First team

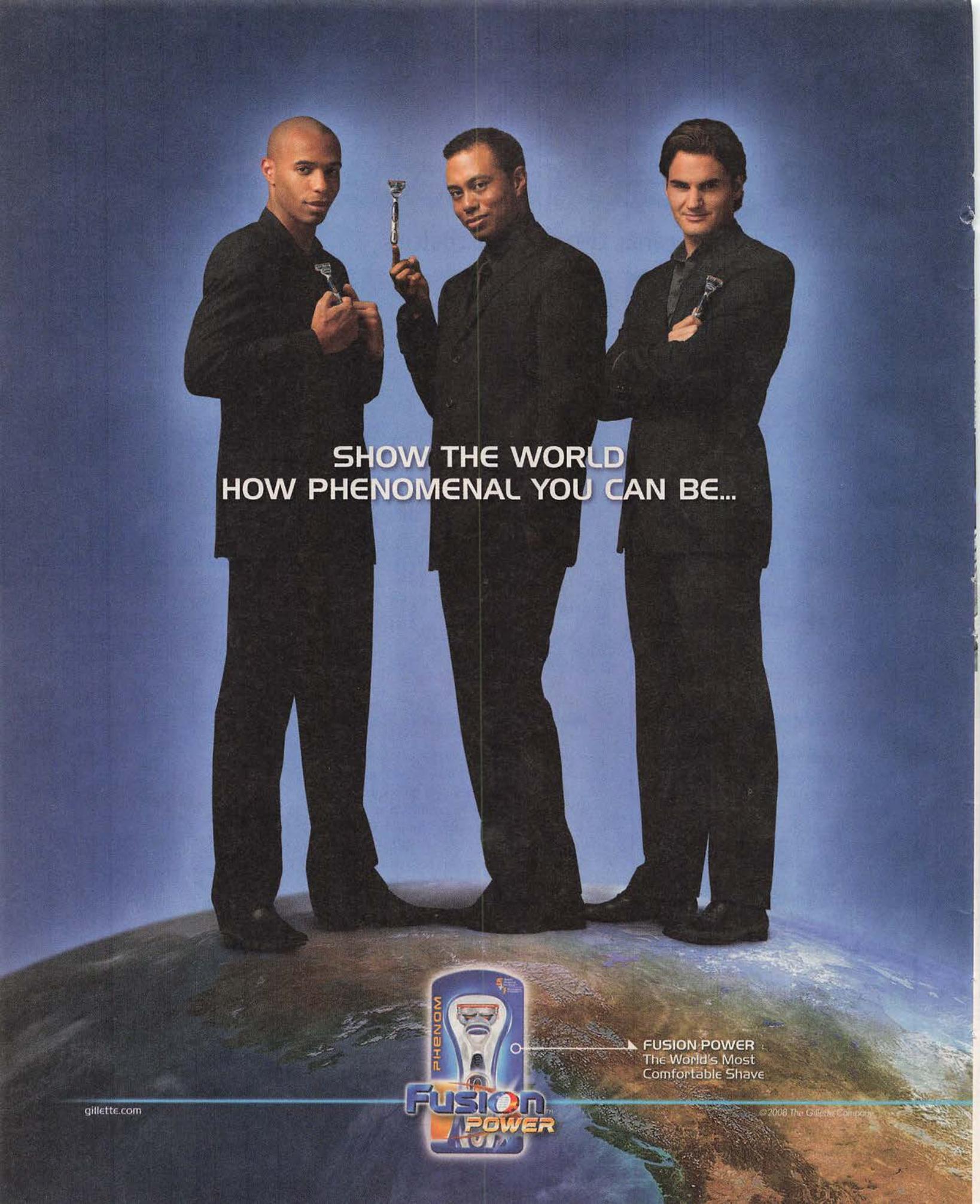
Tyler Hansbrough, C, N. Carolina, Jr.
Kevin Love, C, UCLA, Fr.
Michael Beasley, F, Kansas State, Fr.
Chris Douglas-Roberts, F, Memphis, Jr.
D.J. Augustin, G, Texas, So.

Second team

Luke Harangody, F, Notre Dame, So.
D.J. White, F, Indiana, Sr.
Ryan Anderson, F, California, So.
Shan Foster, F, Vanderbilt, Sr.
Stephen Curry, G, Davidson, So.

All-freshman team

Kevin Love, C, UCLA
Michael Beasley, F, Kansas State
Eric Gordon, G, Indiana
Derrick Rose, G, Memphis
O.J. Mayo, G, USC



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IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

Sports talk with Djimon Hounsou

Two-time Academy Award nominee and star of *Never Back Down* (in theaters Friday)

SN: In the movie, you play a martial arts expert. Did you do any special training?

HOUNSOU: Of course. You kidding me? You make it sound like I just showed up in great shape.

SN: Didn't you, though?

HOUNSOU: No! There's a huge amount of training that takes place.

SN: Like what?

HOUNSOU: It may sound funny, but you really have to be on a schedule and have a strict way of eating, along with a strict training regimen. It takes great discipline to stay conditioned.

SN: So no ice cream after you're done.

HOUNSOU: That wouldn't work, no.

SN: Are you a big sports fan?

HOUNSOU: I'm a fan of hockey, funny enough. I used to love kung fu. I did kung fu for many years and boxed for many years. I love soccer. I like watching basketball as well.

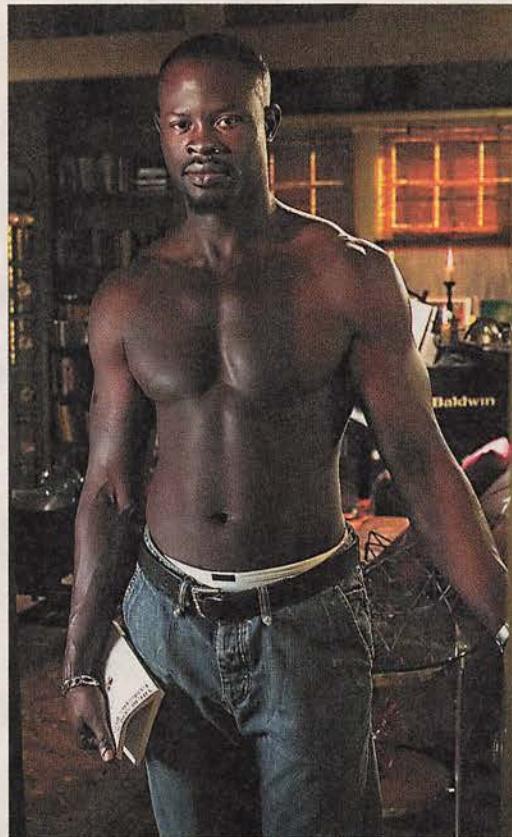
SN: You're 6-4. Can you dunk?

HOUNSOU: I have never tried. I wouldn't be too good at it.

SN: Leonardo DiCaprio, your co-star in *Blood Diamond*, plays some basketball. Did you guys ever play any one-on-one on the set?

HOUNSOU: Well, you know, he likes mixed martial arts as well. I can't wait to show him how much I have learned from the film. When we were shooting *Blood Diamond*, we tried to take each other down once. I think now I may be able to take him down. He's pretty tough.

SN: Who won the first time around?



HOUNSOU: It was kind of a draw.

SN: Rumor has it Patriots quarterback Tom Brady could succeed you as the newest Calvin Klein underwear model. What do you think of that?

HOUNSOU: Good for him. He's a talented guy. He's a good-looking guy, obviously. They can bank on him. —Tricia Garner

Also coming soon(ish) to a theater near you

Leatherheads (April 4).

George Clooney, Renee Zellweger and John Krasinski star in this movie—co-written by former *Sports Illustrated* columnist Rick Reilly—about a 1920s football star.



Speed Racer (May 9).

It's not just for the kids—the film boasts a big-name cast (Susan Sarandon, John Goodman, Matthew Fox) and is directed by the masterminds behind *The Matrix* trilogy.



The Express (October 3).

Based on the true story of Ernie Davis who, against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, became the first African American to win the Heisman Trophy.



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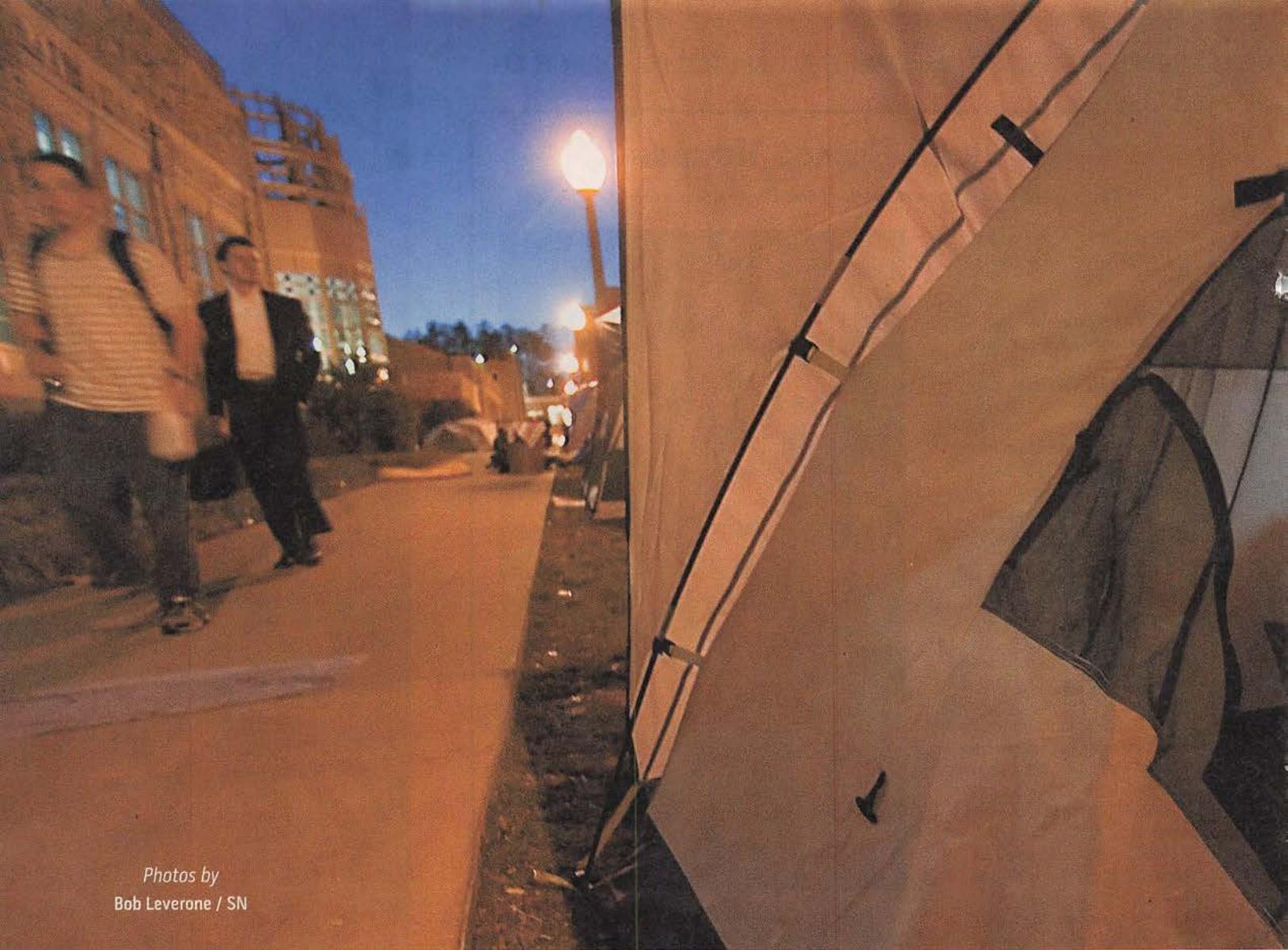
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Turn on Fusion Power – soothing micro-pulses help you reduce friction and increase razor glide

Gillette

The Best a Man Can Get



Photos by
Bob Leverone / SN

The waiting game

When North Carolina visits Duke, the entire basketball world gets excited. But for the prodigiously hard-core denizens of Krzyzewskiville, the craziness starts days—make that months—before tipoff.

Saturday night's Duke-North Carolina game was big. How big? So big, freshman Grant Meeker showed up outside Cameron Indoor Stadium at 10 a.m. in order to be first in line to get in. Now that's a fan, huh?

Did we mention that this happened on *Wednesday*?

And that other Duke students—living in the tent city known as Krzyzewskiville—beat Meeker to the Cameron grounds by more than two months?

Pitch one of the 100 tents at K-ville every year in advance—way in advance—of the Tar Heels' visit and you'd better have somebody occupying it at all times or you'll run the risk of

being bumped off your spot. K-ville has a two-strikes-and-you're-out rule, and there's always a waiting list.

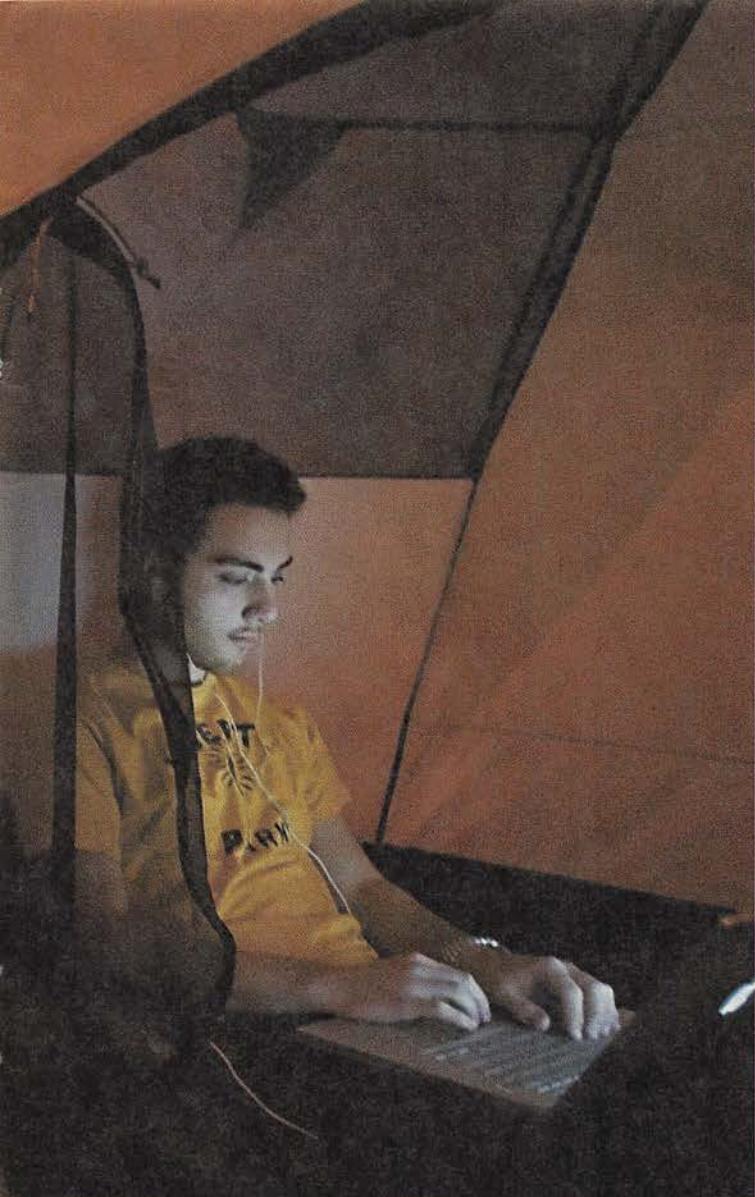
There are rules for the walk-up line, as well. Meeker or his walk-up partner, freshman dormmate Stefan Bergin, was in line for nearly every second of the 81 hours until the arena doors opened and the Crazies flooded the student section.

"We didn't miss any classes because our schedules meshed," Meeker says. "But the problem with the walk-up line is you can't have a tent. We froze and got rained on the whole time."

Only in K-ville.



KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



'It was tough but always fun,' says freshman Ben Castellon, who tented up with friends on January 2 and slept five nights a week in K-ville. Fans such as Castellon and David Shapiro (left) had to guard their temporary homes.



Thirty minutes before tipoff, a coat of body paint makes weeks of grimy tent time feel worth it. But after the game turns sour for the Blue Devils ... well, there's always next year.

The quarterback next door

Brett Favre's skills made him a star.

His regular-guy persona and love of the game made him a legend.

By Dennis Dillon

On the 21st of 28 pages devoted to him in the 2007 Packers media guide is a photo of Brett Favre from January 26, 1997. Helmet held high in his right hand, a smile on his face, he is running across the Louisiana Superdome turf after throwing a touchdown pass in Green Bay's 35-21 victory over the Patriots in Super Bowl 31.

It is the perfect image of Favre. Sure, 11 years later the hair is shorter and grayer, the face is more grizzled and the legs move slower. But that picture captures the essence of who Favre was then, who he is now and who he forever will be in our mind's eye.

A man who played the game with the enthusiasm of a child on Christmas morning.

A record-setting quarterback who restored joy and winning in Titletown.

A competitor who transcended the usual benchmark of admiration and respect for an opponent.

A warrior who suffered more pain than we can imagine but refused to call in sick.

Above all, a human being like the rest of us, a mortal who experienced frailty and tragedy off the field.

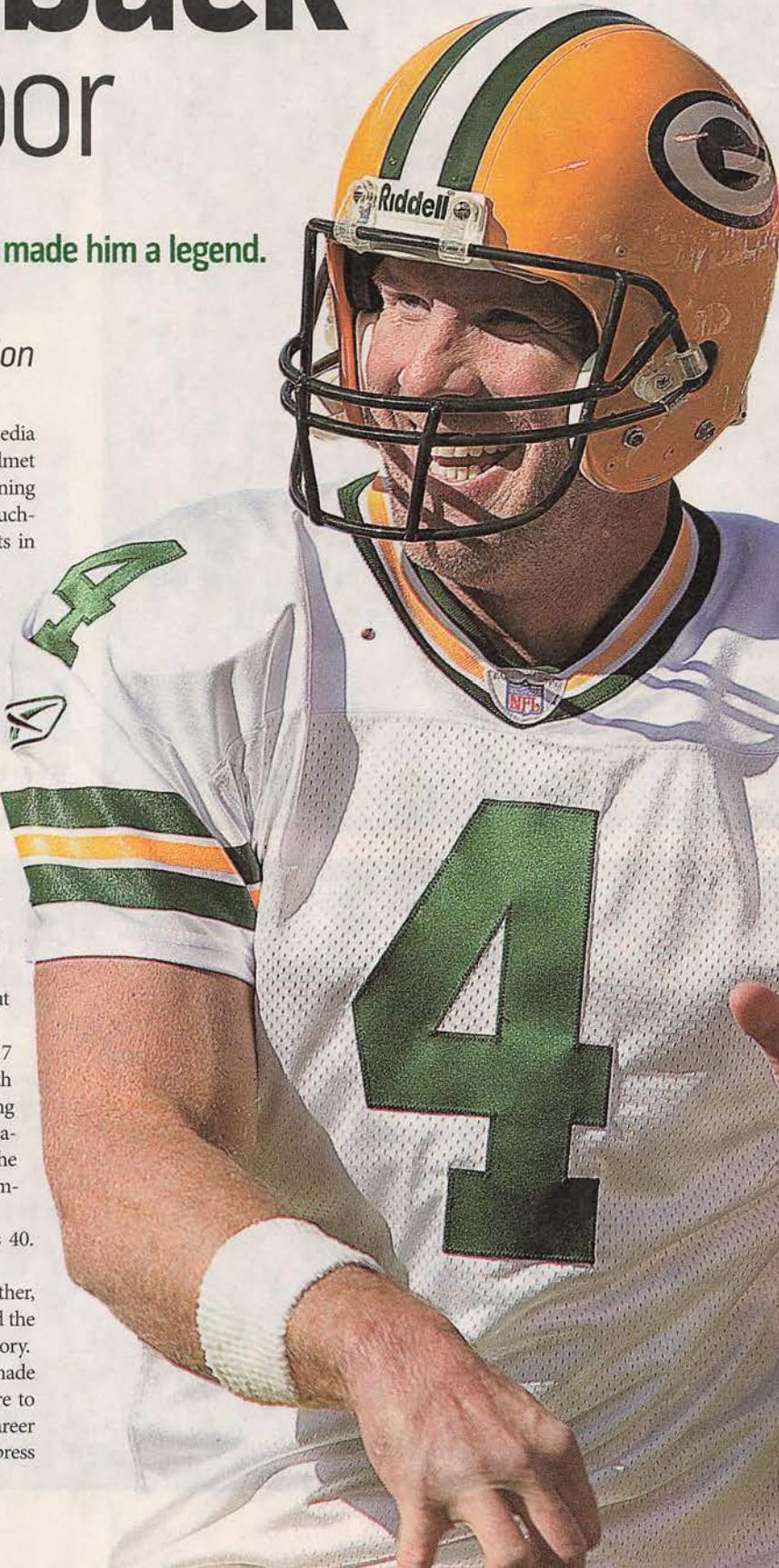
Now, he is gone. And football won't be as fun without him.

Last week's announcement that Favre is retiring after 17 NFL seasons shouldn't have shocked us—he has flirted with that decision for the last several offseasons—but its timing was surprising. He had just completed one of his finest seasons, passing for 4,155 yards and 28 touchdowns as he led the Packers to a 13-3 regular-season record and the NFC championship game.

He is 38, but we believed he could play until he was 40. Maybe 45. Did I hear 50?

It wasn't the physical toll that caught up to him but, rather, the mental grind. It was the week-to-week preparation and the mental stress, which he said grew with each successive victory.

Don't think the Packers, a young team on the rise that made an improbable run toward the Super Bowl, coerced Favre to exit prematurely. "How could you not want Brett Favre's career to continue?" Packers coach Mike McCarthy asked at a press conference.



But we can't always have what we want. So we are left with memories of a man who captivated us with his athleticism and touched us with his humanity.

One of Favre's distinguishing characteristics was that look of joy behind his facemask. Whether he was throwing four touchdown passes in a runaway victory or trying to overcome a deficit in the last two minutes, he loved to play. He displayed his exuberance unabashedly after a touchdown, running down the field to congratulate a receiver or jumping into the arms of a lineman.

Can you picture Peyton Manning slapping hands with a referee? Or Tom Brady throwing snowballs on the sideline? And Favre was just as playful off the field, entertaining teammates and coaches with his stories and practical jokes.

He breathed new life into the Packers. Green Bay had fallen into a black hole, making only one postseason appearance from 1973 through 1992, before former general manager Ron Wolf pulled the trigger on one of the signature trades in

NFL history. He dealt the 17th overall pick in the 1992 draft to

Atlanta for a then-obscure second-year quarterback from Southern Miss. Over the next 16 seasons, Favre helped lead the Pack to seven division championships, 11 playoff appearances and two Super Bowls. Along the way, he won three league MVP honors, was selected to nine Pro Bowls and set NFL records for touchdown passes (442), passing yards (61,655), pass-

ing attempts (8,758) and interceptions (288).

He played the role of gunslinger, taking many risks and never believing he couldn't complete a pass. There were many he wished he could have back, most notably his last one, which cornerback Corey Webster intercepted in overtime of the NFC championship game. That led to a 23-20 Giants win.

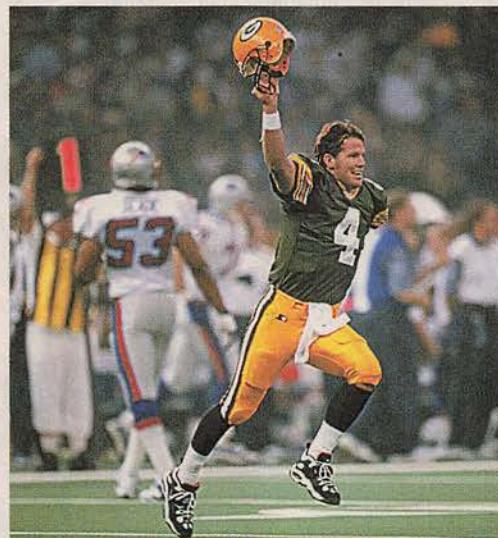
And, boy, could Favre throw a fastball. The velocity on his passes crushed many receivers' fingers and egos.

"Get your head around! That's my lasting image," says former Packers wide receiver Antonio

We are left with memories of a man who captivated us with his athleticism and touched us with his humanity.

Freeman about playing with Favre. "I remember coming out of my routes, looking for the ball. I've never been in that situation, but I would imagine it's kind of like facing the barrel of a gun. You knew that ball was going to come steaming out of there and if you didn't get your head around fast enough ... a lot of bad things could happen."

Over the past two decades, no player was held in higher esteem around the NFL. Opponents and



Even opposing players and fans had to admit, this was a face an entire nation could love.

He never—ever—took a day off

In the history of the NFL, only five quarterbacks besides Brett Favre have started as many as 93 consecutive regular-season games. And that, amazingly, is the lead he holds over his closest pursuer, Peyton Manning. Manning may yet catch him, but if he does, it will be late in the 2013 season. Mark that on your calendar—in pencil.

Quarterback

Brett Favre, Packers 1992-2007
Peyton Manning, Colts 1998-2007
Ron Jaworski, Eagles 1977-1984
Tom Brady, Patriots 2001-2007
Joe Ferguson, Bills 1977-1984
Dan Marino, Dolphins 1987-1993

Years

Consecutive starts

160

116

110

107

95

253

fans in other NFL cities embraced Favre as fervently as his own teammates and Lambeau Field Cheeseheads did. Show me a player who didn't admire Favre, and I'll show you a player who never spent an afternoon competing against him.

"I don't think any other quarterback in the league played with the type of passion he displayed," says Vikings defensive tackle Kevin Williams. "He was respected by everyone because of the things he accomplished on the field and the things he overcame off the field."

He was courageous, reliable and durable. Although Favre suffered multiple injuries over the

years—a first-degree shoulder separation, deep thigh bruise, severely sprained ankle, broken right thumb and concussion among them—he rose

above the pain and never failed to answer the call. Beginning September 27, 1992, he started 253 consecutive games (275 including the postseason)—an iron man streak even more impressive than Cal Ripken's in baseball.

Favre was the people's quarterback. He played the game passionately but never took himself too seriously. He was far from perfect, which made us love him all the more.

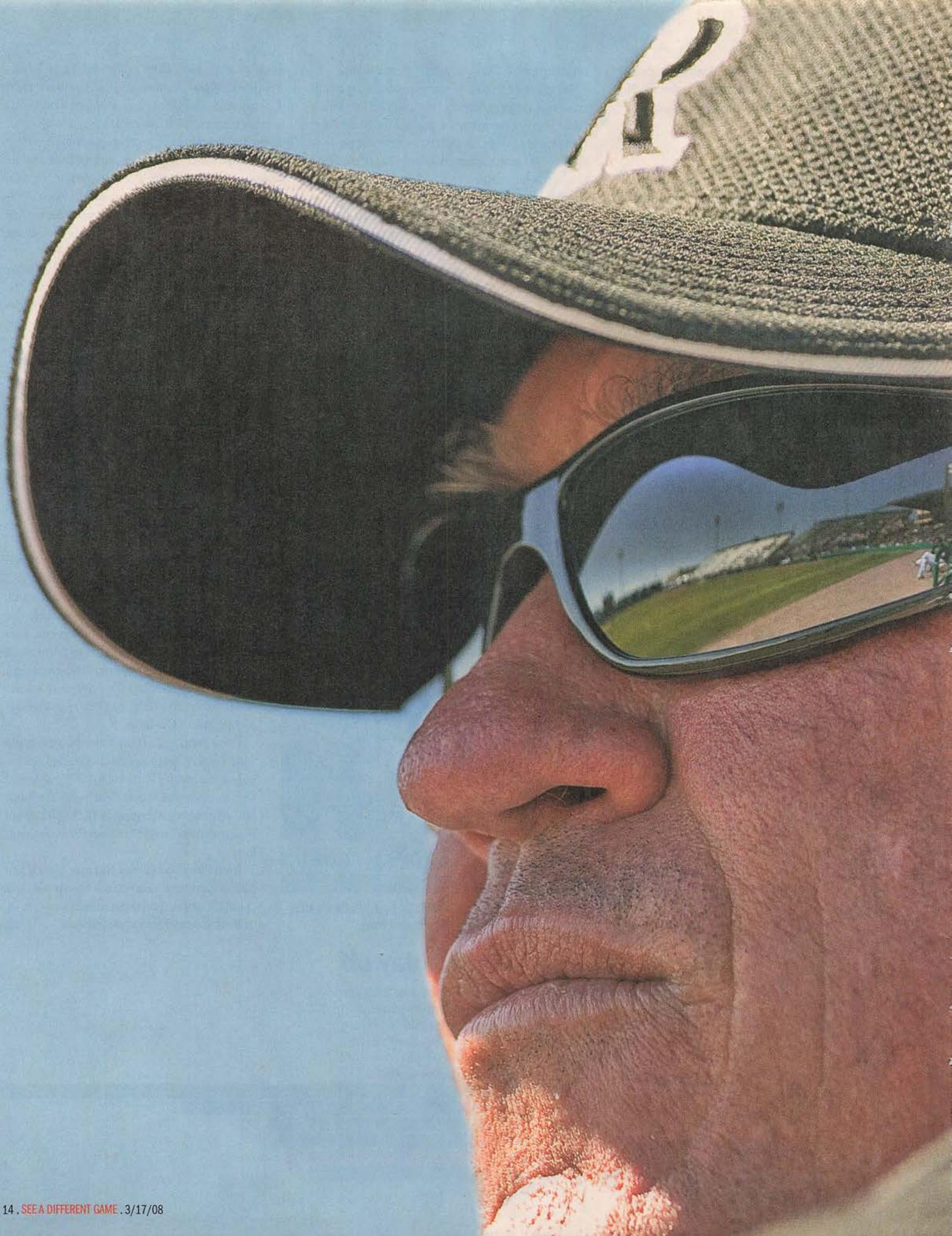
He maintained his Southern boy roots and liked being at home near Hattiesburg, Miss., where he'd play golf, fish, ride his tractor and, most of all, spend time with his family. He dealt with a number of difficult personal situations, including an addiction to painkillers; the successful battle his wife, Deanna, fought with breast cancer; and the unexpected death of his father, Irvin, the day before a Monday night game in Oakland.

Favre went out on the field the next night with a heavy heart and, with millions watching on national TV, threw for 399 yards and four touchdowns in a 41-7 win over the Raiders. Afterward, he wept as he talked about how much he loved his father. We wept with him.

Brett Favre was all that and more. But if you had to capture him in just a few words, you could do worse than these three.

Real. Competitive. Quarterback.

SN





MLB

LIVING IN THE MOMENT

You want 'truly defining'? Rockies manager Clint Hurdle finds it in an eight-game losing streak, a phenom tag gone amiss, the companionship of a dying 15-year-old ... and whatever else a challenging life throws his way. *By Bob Hille*

The story goes that the defining moment in the Colorado Rockies' 2007 season came late on a chilly fall evening as Matt Holliday careened headlong toward home plate at Coors Field. Holliday bounced chin first, skidding to a stop on an unfoamed runway, as questions hung in the thin Denver air. Safe or out? Hell, never mind safe or out, dead or alive? In that playoff play—had the Rockies become the wildest wild card of all time? Could a season with this many ups and downs, twists and turns, be real?

The answers would, in a moment, define a team. That's how the story goes.

But now, on a chilly spring morning in his office at Tucson's Hi Corbett Field, with

four months' perspective, manager Clint Hurdle considers the defining moment of a season like no other in baseball history. He fiddles with his reading glasses, then leans back in his office chair and rubs his perpetually ruddy face. He pinpoints the defining moment for his 2007 Colorado Rockies.

"We had just come off maybe one of our greatest highs organizationally in sweeping the Yankees, putting us a handful of games over .500," he says, going all the way back to June 21. "We're going to head out on the road, another challenge. The road has always been a challenge for us, and we proceeded to lose eight straight games. We had four walkoff losses in eight games."

Go figure.

A team is 38-34 after a sweet sweep of the Yankees and then goes belly up. And Skip sees it as a defining moment, a doughnut of



Holliday's playoff-clinching dash home is forever etched in Rockies fans' minds. Yet Hurdle recalls a less-celebrated moment.

a start to a 10-game road trip, a big, fat friggin' oh-fer that skidded into 1-9?

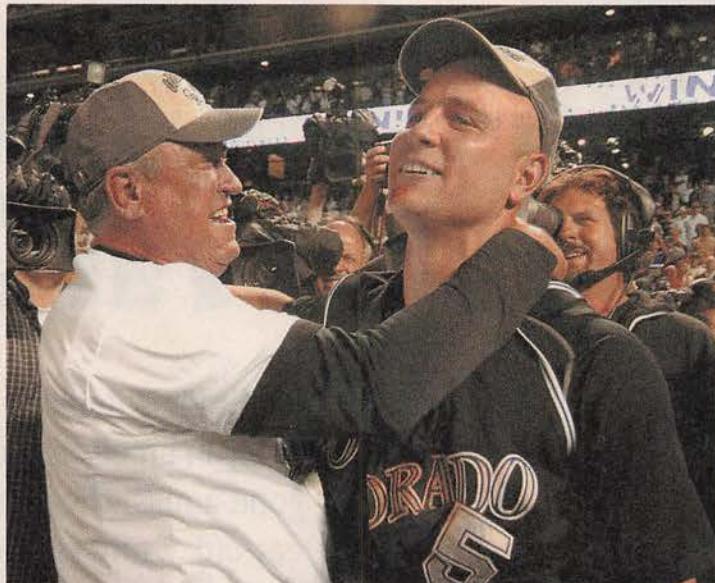
"At the most challenging time, coming off the biggest high, they just stood up," Hurdle explains. "They didn't point fingers. They didn't hide. They didn't go into denial. They didn't say, 'We're not good enough, and this is a sign.' And we responded by coming home and sweeping the Mets, and incrementally our season got a little better each month until September rolled around."

Remember September? Thirteen wins in 14 games, rallying from 2½ back in the wild-card race with seven to play. Rookies stepping up like All-Stars, All-Stars stepping aside to become role players. The win over San Diego and postseason sweeps into a franchise's first World Series, they all go back to an eight-game losing streak less than halfway through the season.

See, that's the thing about a story. One man's defining moment is another's "what the hell's wrong with this team?" There's rarely a singular defining moment. Instead, teams—and the individuals leading them—are the products of layers of moments, past and present.

So, maybe Matt Holliday had to take one on the chin as a defining moment. Maybe defining moments did come in the visitors' clubhouses of Toronto and Chicago and Houston, on the hard road of early summer.

But maybe a defining moment came during a playing career that can only be called a disappointment.



Maybe another came in the oncology wing at Denver Children's Hospital. And maybe there are no defining moments, only expectations met, surpassed or unfulfilled.

The story goes that rookies carry the veterans' equipment in spring training. It's the kids' taste of humble pie *a la* baseball.

But there's got to be a bigger point than a dose of

This is ... Clint Hurdle

What's on my iPod: A bunch of country western, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Pat Waters, then some old-school Foghat, Deep Purple, the Doors.

My favorite movie: *Young Frankenstein*.

My favorite TV show: *Cold Case*. I missed it last night.

If I weren't in baseball, I would ... Be looking for a job. I think I have some marketable skills, but I don't have a college degree. I know that might present some challenges. I might have to be very creative. I could envision myself at least trying to teach something to young people.

Words I live by: Lord help me be a simple man in a complex world.

humility for this year's phenoms, doesn't there? The veterans and the rookies, low-number guys and high-number guys alike, exit the same clubhouse door at Hi Corbett Field beneath a sign that reads: "Tell me, I may listen. Teach me, I may remember. Involve me, I will do it."

So on a brilliantly sunny but chilling morning in Tucson, Rockies strength and conditioning coach Brad Andress is *involving* Casey Weathers, who this time a year ago was the closer in a big-time college program. He was blowing away overmatched hitters with a high-90s fastball and a wicked slider, the kind of stuff that made him a star at Vanderbilt and the Rockies' top pick in the June draft. Andress insists on calling him "Werthers" as he makes the 22-year-old climb a three-step stepladder in the middle of the other pitchers—rookies and veterans—doing their preworkout stretching.

Weathers is asked to climb the ladder and, after introducing himself in his "big boy" voice, recite by memory for Andress and the audience, Kipling's *The Law of the Jungle* from *The Jungle Book*, which begins:

*Now this is the law of the jungle,
as old and as true as the sky,*

*And the wolf that shall keep it
may prosper, but the wolf that shall
break it must die.*

*As the creeper that girdles the
tree trunk, the law runneth
forward and back;*

*For the strength of the pack is the wolf,
and the strength of the wolf is the pack.*

Andress uses equal parts humiliation and humor in the process as Weathers tries and fails—miserably—to remember the words. His lovely parting gift: Weathers will need to have in camp within two days an elk head because the right-hander is from Elk Grove, Calif. He'll be back atop the ladder again the next day, followed this time by fellow first-year pitchers who—their legs visibly shaking as they stand atop the ladder—must introduce themselves and, maybe, recite "The Star Spangled Banner"—"with emotion, like you're doing *Romeo and Juliet*," Andress implores. One other requirement: no tune allowed. Try it; it's harder than it sounds.

The players—including Weathers—are laughing. Hurdle, twirling

See, that's the thing about a story. One man's defining moment is another's 'what the hell's wrong with this team?'

a fungo bat and smiling, wordlessly wanders the perimeter as pitchers and catchers stretch away tightness.

Thirty years ago, Hurdle, 50, easily could have been the bonus baby tasting a dose of humility on the stepladder, a lesson he might have benefited from during a 10-year big league career in which he went from high-upside prospect to low-output journeyman. More often than not, he was better on the party circuit than on the field, a self-described "quick-fix guy" who wanted results yes-

terday. He fought alcoholism and failed at marriage twice before meeting Karla, his wife of eight years with whom he has two children, Maddie, 5, and Christian, 3, and a happiness and comfort with himself that he never knew as a player.

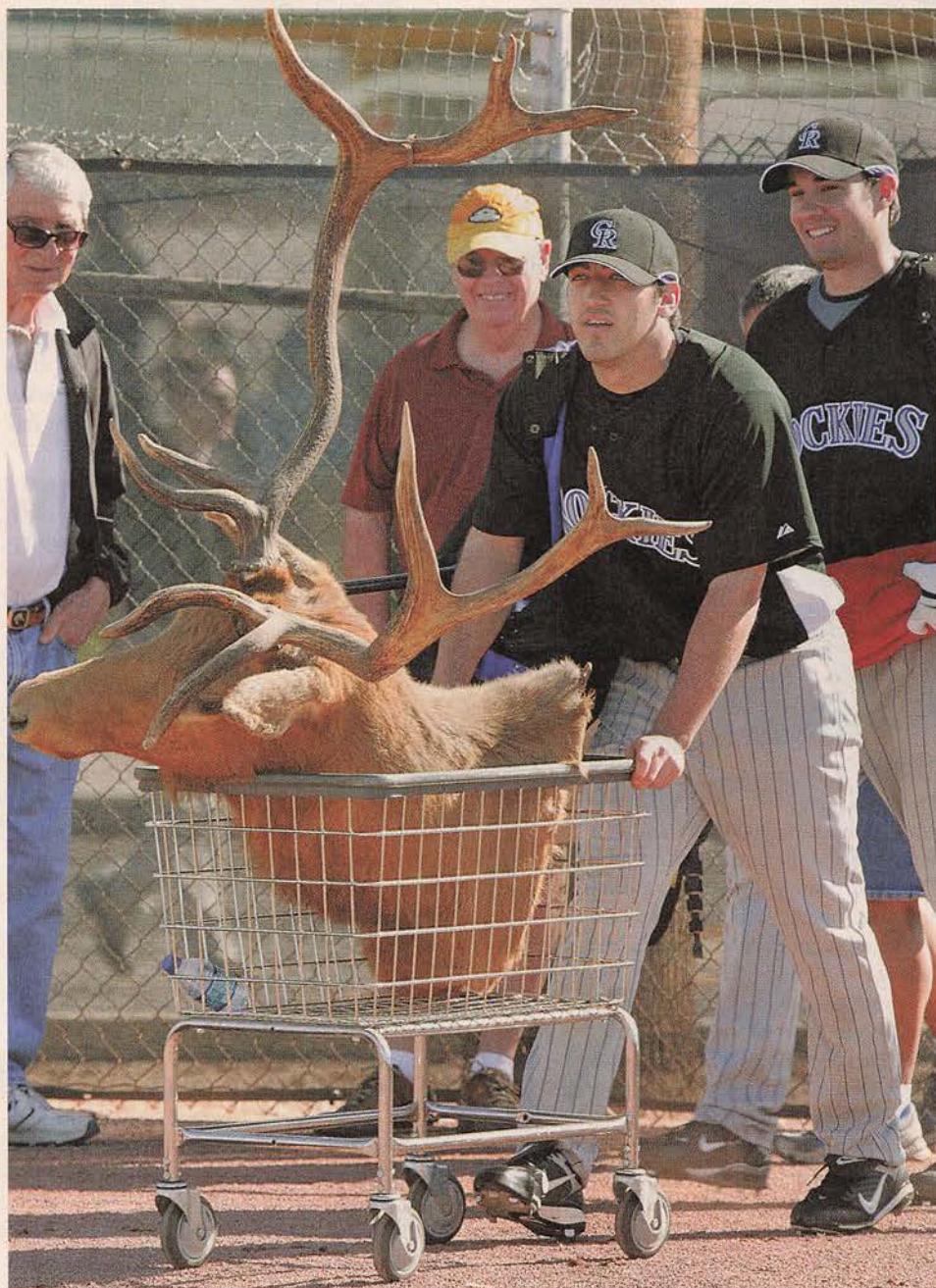
After another round of bullpens and pitchers' fielding practice and hitting and bunting, Hurdle fields questions about some of the N.L.'s best young hitters, about the external pressures and expectations for his 2008 team and, yes, finally, the stepladder and the pitchers. Has he ever seen anyone's

legs shake that bad? The wrinkles around his eyes deepen as he smiles, nods his big, square head and says, "I think there's probably been a couple of points in my life where I've shaken that bad. Maybe not on a ball field and maybe, yes, on a ball field."

The story goes that the natives were restless. Would this team—despite having grown better defensively and on the mound—ever amount to anything?

In the second week of September, the Rockies were seven games out of first, exactly where they'd been after sweeping the Mets in July. The prognosis: not good. "I saw them in Philadelphia," a National League scout says of a September 10-13 series, "and they looked bad."

The Rockies were running out of season, and Colorado faithful—those still paying attention, at least—were out of patience. Whispers around baseball had grown to a roar: Maybe you can't ever win in Denver. But a funny thing happened on the way to fan apathy: The Rockies began to win. In



With Hurdle's Rockies, a rookie like Weathers needs a plus fastball and a minus ego.

Another Series trip for the Rockies?

How likely is it that the Rockies will make it back to the World Series in 2008? And win it? Not very likely on both counts.

- The last team to appear in the Series two years in a row: the 2000-01 Yankees.
- The last N.L. team to appear in the Series twice in a row? The 1995-96 Braves.
- The last World Series-losing team to come back and win it the following year: the 1989 A's.

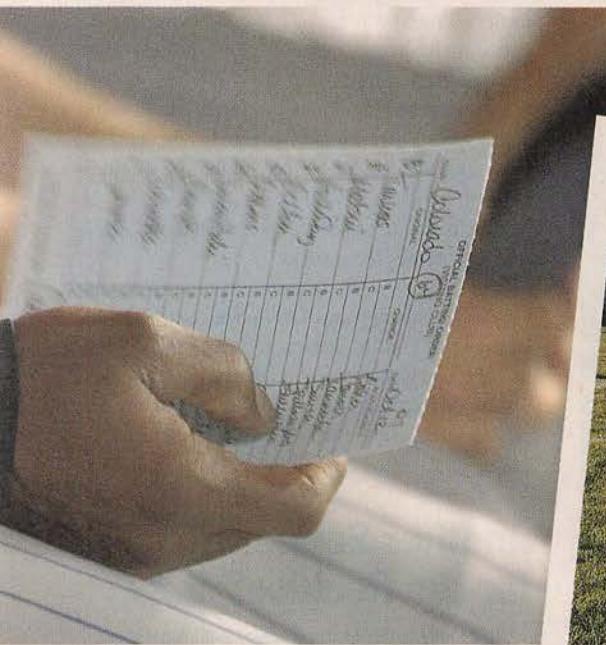
	A.L.	N.L.
1996	2	2
1997	3	1
1998	2	2
1999	4	2
2000	1	2
2001	3	2
2002	2	3
2003	3	2
2004	3	1
2005	3	3
2006	1	2
2007	1	0
Total	28	22
	(.583)	(.458)

A look at how many teams made repeat postseason appearances since the advent of the Division Series in 1995:

—Steve Gietschier

The story goes the way it wants to go, not the way Clint Hurdle or anyone else wants it to go. Life isn't lived in smooth, straight lines. You may fail as a phenom or a husband but succeed as a major league manager—by offering comfort to a dying young man.

Blakeman had the Rockies' number, but his impact went beyond the 64
Hurdle circled atop the lineup card
during the season-ending surge.

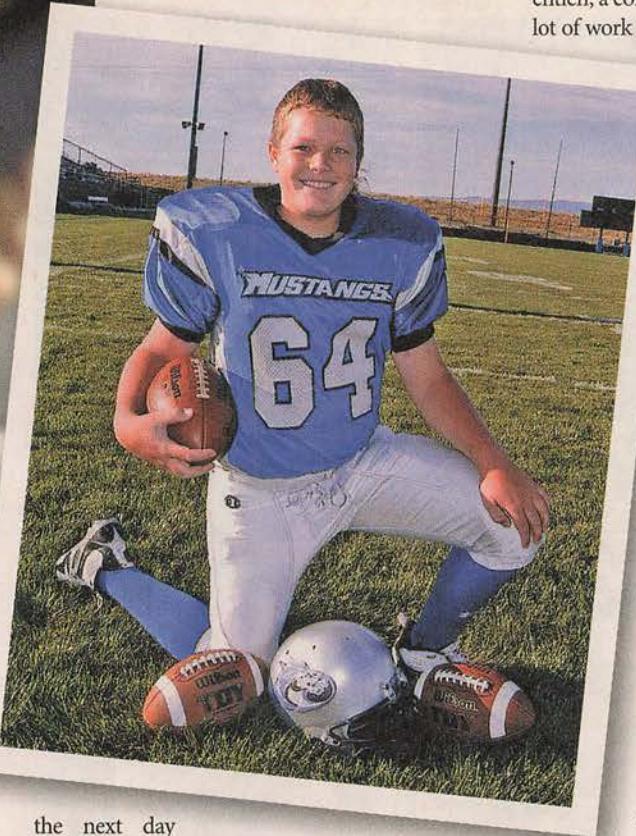


Denver and on the road, too, 21 times in 22 games, right into a World Series, as they ignited the Rocky Mountain region.

"Clint went from being on the hot seat," says the scout, "to being on the throne."

Hurdle, who never panicked when the team was struggling (in seasons before and last season, too), never let his team get too low when the losses piled up or too high when the victories, prospects and hopes began to multiply. "He's real good at taking things day to day," says third baseman Garrett Atkins. "We're not going to celebrate our wins, and we're not going to dwell on our losses. His constant presence of positive attitude is good."

Hurdle calls the concept "showering well." You go out, you prepare, you focus, you let it all out on the field. After the game, you honestly self-evaluate, then take a shower and go home. Don't carry it with you, don't wear it. Yes, there will be save opportunities blown; yes, there will be outs made with winning runs in scoring position. Yes, there will be managerial levers pulled that don't work. No one is perfect. There are, Hurdle acknowledges, nights where you can't help but wear it, individually or as a team. But the sooner you get rid of those things, the better to show up



the next day with, as he says, good ears and fresh eyes and the freedom to let your skills play. "Patience," Hurdle likes to say, in both the large and small scheme of things, "takes courage."

It's a message he delivers day in and day out, win or lose.

"He's vocal, he's loud, energetic, and that's what you have to be when you have a bunch of young guys. He keeps things loose," says shortstop Troy Tulowitzki, at 23 a superstar-in-waiting and clubhouse leader wise beyond his years.

The payoff goes beyond last year's stretch run; baseball insiders say there's a multiplier effect of building something together under the intense pressure a pennant race offers. Lose, and you're out? Then why not *not* lose for 21 of 22 games. The catch: Not only do baseball people in general and Rockies fans specifically know you can win in

Denver, but now they expect you to.

Two days after the Rockies were swept out of the World Series, the weight room at Coors Field was full and stayed that way throughout the off-season.

The story goes that Clint Hurdle was just making a quick supermarket run—like many helpful Highlands Ranch husbands do—to the neighborhood Safeway. Truth be told, the Rockies' manager is a familiar face around the south Denver suburb. That's why it didn't surprise him when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

As Hurdle recalls the day in 2005, Linda Techentien, a complete stranger, said, "I know you do a lot of work at Children's Hospital and I don't normally do this sort of thing, but I have a close family friend that's going through a rough time. Could you make a call, could you sign something?"

Hurdle is recounting a story he has told dozens of times. But here, in a tchotchke-filled office in Arizona with his coaches in the next room discussing the day's practice schedule, gimme shoes and real estate, there's still a sense of wonder in his voice, wonder that soon melts into raw emotion.

The quick version: Hurdle gets a phone number and calls Kyle Blakeman, striking up a friendship with the teen. When Kyle isn't home to take Hurdle's calls, he talks with Kyle's mom, Joanna, who gives Hurdle insight into just how seriously ill with cancer Kyle is. But Kyle makes progress enough to try out for baseball at Highlands Ranch High School. Hurdle pauses at the memory. "Last spring, one of the best times was me calling him up at 6 o'clock in the morning, forgetting what time it was, but he was already up because he was waiting to find out if he'd made the high school baseball team. And he did," Hurdle says, his voice rising in amazement. "He made the team."

If that was one of the best times, then shortly thereafter would be two that vie for the worst: First, Joanna called Hurdle before the high school season was over to tell him that Kyle's cancer had returned and the outlook was bleaker than she and her husband, Brad, had shared with anyone, including Kyle. Then, late in the summer, Joanna called Hurdle at Coors Field to see if he could come by the hospital to see Kyle. "He felt he was about to pass," Hurdle recalls. "First time I've ever gotten a call with that depth and heartfelt emotion. Ever."

Now understand that Clint Hurdle is no



At 50, Hurdle has come to embrace his life, which now centers on Karla and the kids, Christian (left) and Maddie. 'I've got two young children,' he jokes. 'I've got to drink a couple of Red Bulls before I go home.'

stranger to sick kids. He and Karla live with one. Maddie has a rare genetic disorder that makes her prone to seizures and will profoundly affect her health throughout her life. In fact, she was hospitalized with pneumonia during last fall's N.L. Championship Series. But this? Being summoned by a 15-year-old on his deathbed? That's a defining moment.

Kyle didn't die that day. Hurdle visited the following evening after a loss and as they often had before, he and his friend talked baseball and the little things that make a big difference.

As he recalls that visit, Hurdle tilts his head back and quickly, almost imperceptibly, rubs tears from his eyes and continues. "Anytime when you have a heart for people, you want to include them, and I wanted to include Kyle. I said, 'Kyle, gimme something. Kyle, gimme something here that I can use, between you and me, to try and, y'know, jump-start this thing a little bit.' He's looking at me like, 'Are you paying attention to the situation?' I can see him. He's like, 'What are you looking for?' I go, 'Gimme a number.'

Beginning with the next day's game, there would be a "64"—Kyle's

number in football—circled atop every Rockies lineup card. Along the way were an 11-game winning streak, Holliday's wild-card tiebreaking bellyflop against the Padres, a Division Series sweep of the Phillies, an NLCS sweep of the Diamondbacks that made it 21 wins in 22 games ... and the death of a very brave 15-year-old.

On the day the Rockies clinched that N.L. pen-

nant, Kyle's 10-year-old sister, Macie, threw out the first pitch. The Rockies scored six runs in the fourth inning. Rookie starter Franklin Morales didn't get the win; he was pulled after 64 pitches. The Rockies won, 6-4.

Says Hurdle, the wonder returning to his voice: "Men or women can't write that story."

The story goes

that Clint Hurdle would take the diamond lane to the majors. "I bubble inside when I think about his potential," John Schuerholz, then Royals director of scouting, told *Sports Illustrated* in the 1978 cover story that anointed Hurdle "This Year's Phenom." High expectations unfulfilled. Yet Hurdle says of that cover headline that has followed him for 30 years: "I've had many demons I've had to run from—that isn't a demon."

The story goes that Clint Hurdle saw a pregnant woman in line at a James Taylor concert in Denver. He asked her if she knew whether it

was a boy or a girl. Doesn't matter, she replied, as long as it's healthy. "You're thinking," Hurdle told *USA Today*, "What if it's not healthy? You're still going to love it, and you're going to deal with it."

The story goes that this time last year, *SPORTING NEWS* picked the Rockies to finish fifth in the N.L. West, but only because there are only five teams in the division. The story goes that expectations born from last season ratcheted things up a notch in 2008 and that last year's National League champions will be guaranteed contender status this season. "There are opinions thrown around in spring training," Hurdle says, "both good and bad, and a lot of them are wrong."

The story goes.

It goes the way it wants to go, not the way Clint Hurdle or anyone else wants it to go. Life isn't lived in smooth, straight lines. You may fail as a phenom or a husband but succeed as a major league manager—by offering comfort to a dying young man. Be patient, though it takes courage. On a good day, there are lessons to be learned, to be put to use further down life's not easily mapped road. And, expectations be damned, those are the defining moments.

SN

Breaking down a doozy of a division

Rockies general manager Dan O'Dowd, the architect of one of baseball's best young teams, says playing in what quickly has become one of the game's best divisions is a big plus. "It prepares you to play outside the division," he says, the implication being that's where headway in the standings can be made.

Based on the N.L. West's projected order of finish in *SPORTING NEWS'* baseball yearbook (now on newsstands), rival scouts offer views on teams in what O'Dowd calls "a very talented division":

1. Diamondbacks. "They put their offseason effort into adding to the rotation by acquiring Dan Haren, which is as positive an addition as anyone in the division made. ... But the offense is still suspect."

2. Rockies. "With such a young team, those players now know they aren't only good but they are a good team and can compete at this level. That said, it's always difficult the second year for a team that comes out of nowhere."

3. Dodgers. "The Dodgers accomplish less with more than any team in the game. ... That tells you there is a big problem, and fixing it is not as simple as replacing Grady Little with Joe Torre."

4. Padres. "Each year, you wind up talking about how the Padres overachieved. That's a credit to the team, but it also is something that can't go on forever. One of these years they will play down to their potential."

5. Giants. "The Giants are dead in the water."



When Bowden surveys his football kingdom now, it might be a stretch to say he's satisfied.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

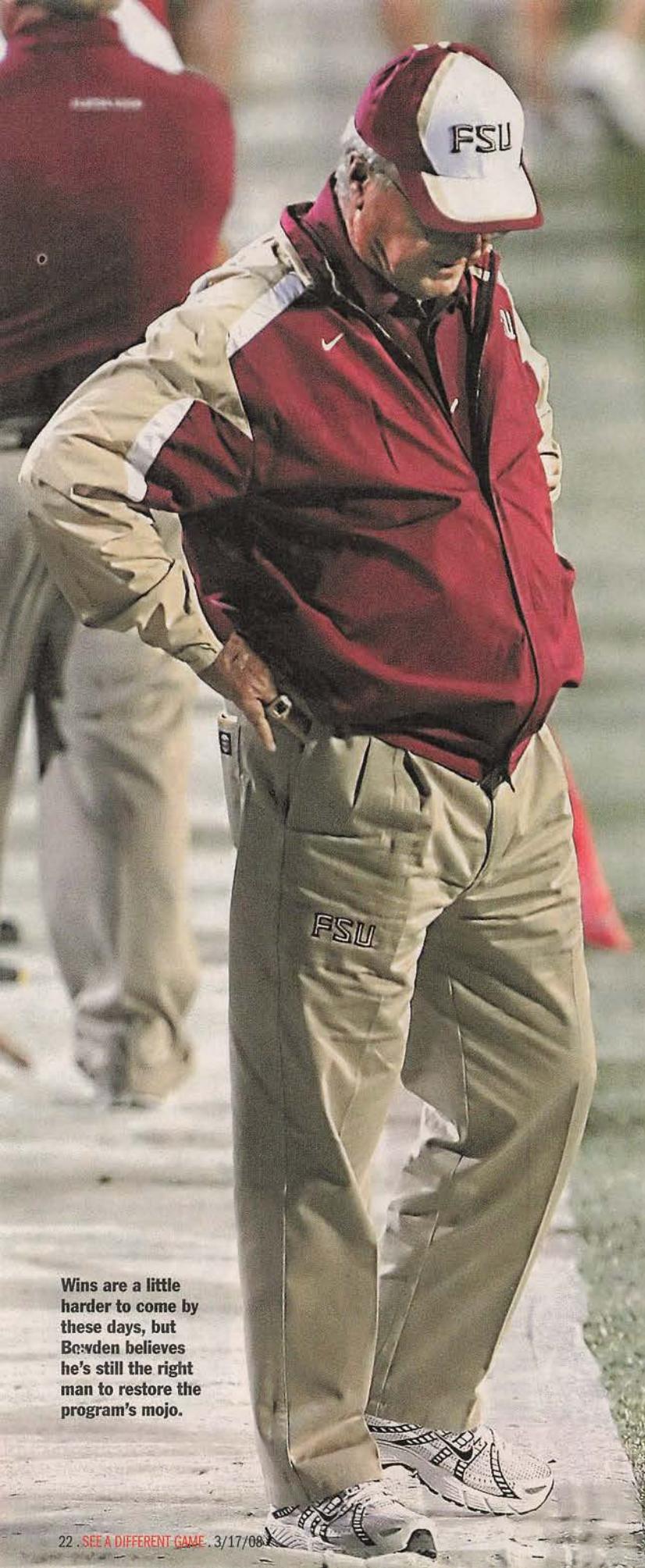
A legend be

The problem with near perfection is that it makes anything less look like failure. Florida



before the fall

State and Bobby Bowden understand just how fickle success really is. *By Tom Dienhart*



Wins are a little harder to come by these days, but Bowden believes he's still the right man to restore the program's mojo.

IT'S

raining on Bobby Bowden. Figures.

At least it's a warm rain. And it's only

the statue of Bowden outside of Doak Campbell Stadium, a monolithic tribute to Florida State's gridiron granddaddy.

Students scurry by. None stop to gaze. Why should they?

As he embarks on his 33rd spring practice as architect of one of the most fabulous programs in college football history, Bowden cradles his dynasty.

It's dying.

The Seminoles are shells of what they once were, bogged in a morass of what must seem like mediocrity. The colossus that went 109-13-1 in the 1990s—that's 13 losses in an entire decade—while winning eight ACC crowns and two national championships has morphed into a less intimidating 69-34 wannabe this decade.

Fear the spear? Forget it. Wake Forest—*Wake Forest!*—has beaten the 'Noles each of the past two years.

Florida State is Ali vs. Holmes ... Willie Mays with the Mets ... Joe Namath with the Rams. It's sad. Even sadder: A recent academic scandal is draping the athletic department with a cape of shame as the Seminoles prep for the start of spring practice next Monday.

Those inside Florida State's Moore Athletic Center on this damp winter day insist we have it all wrong, that things aren't that bad. But perception matters more than reality. And the perception is this: Florida State is floundering.

And there stands Bobby Bowden. Right or wrong, good or bad, a cold, hard finger of blame jabs him in the chest. Because he is Florida State. This is his child.

"I believe the reason that FSU has struggled at times in recent years is very simple," says former quarterback Chris Rix. "In my opinion, it has been the result of a combination of being outplayed as well as outcoached."

Dadgummit, it isn't supposed to be like this for iconoclastic legends cast in bronze.

But the end is near for Bowden. And the last sentence defining his glorious career figures to be punctuated with a period—not the exclamation point that used to define the program.

Florida State will rise again. There's too much history and money in the program for it not to. The school has taken steps to right a listing ship, hatching a succession plan late last year that will eventually result in offensive coordinator Jimbo Fisher's becoming head coach. If it doesn't happen in three years, Fisher will be owed \$2.5 million. If he bolts before then, Fisher will owe the school \$2.5 million.

"You have to believe in yourself and what you're doing," says Bowden, who signed a one-year contract extension in the offseason for approximately \$2.5 million. "I think I have another run in me."

So Bowden coaches on, jockeying to make FSU matter again—and to stay ahead of Penn State's Joe Paterno in the chase to be the college football coach with the most career wins (Bowden leads,



Playing quarterback at Florida State isn't what it used to be. Just ask Weatherford.

373-372). Don't think that trivial pursuit doesn't matter.

"This is all my dad knows," says Terry Bowden, a college football TV analyst and former coach of Auburn. "He doesn't tell me how much longer he'll go. But you have to think he is motivated to stay ahead of Paterno for that win record."

Why does Bobby Bowden soldier on? He'll tell you why. He'll tell you about cutting out pictures of Alabama players and pasting them in a scrapbook as a boy growing up in Birmingham. He'll tell you about bawling over Alabama losses. He'll tell you about worshiping the man who coached his Crimson Tide, the greatest coach who ever lived: Bear Bryant.

Bowden saw an aging Bear get ridiculed as his program slipped. The Bear should retire, they howled. The Bear did. Then, the Bear died.

Bowden, 78, doesn't have to squint to see himself. This is why he still climbs to the top of that coaching tower and scribbles notes from his patriarchal perch. Coaching gives him purpose. It gives him life. If he doesn't coach, he'll die.

"My dad also died about six months after he retired," says Bowden. "I think of that. But I have other reasons why I'm still going. I still have good health, so I go on. The critics who think I should leave? It's a normal reaction. If I don't win them all, you can count on people wanting me to leave."

Bowden laughs his friendly laugh. You have to

Talent: Is it an issue?

Florida State lacks talent?

That idea makes former FSU running back Lorenzo Booker laugh.

"Look at all of the guys in the pros from our so-called 'terrible' teams," says Booker, who played from 2003-06. "We had talent."

For a program that posted an incredible 109-13-1 record in the 1990s and has gone a less intimidating 69-34 this decade, the numbers don't lie. Just look at the team's NFL draft picks:

	Total	1st round	Avg. per year
1990s	64	13	6.4
2000s	50	13	6.3

Off-field issues are keeping FSU on the low road

When it comes to infamy, Florida State is famous. The lowlights:

■ An agent sponsored a shopping spree at a Foot Locker for several players in 1993, prompting then-Florida coach Steve Spurrier to dub FSU "Free Shoes University."

■ Kicker Sebastian Janikowski was known for barroom brawls and other off-field escapades in the late-1990s.

■ Wideout Peter Warrick went on a deep-discount shopping binge in 1999 that prompted Bobby Bowden to say he was "praying for a misdemeanor."

■ In 2002, quarterback Adrian McPherson, who was being investigated on gambling and

theft charges, was dismissed from the team.

But the academic scandal that surfaced before last year's Music City Bowl is the mother of all misdeeds under Bowden. Stupid off-field behavior is one thing. The soiling of a school's academic integrity is another.

And the timing couldn't have been worse. FSU wrapped up its second consecutive 7-6 season by playing in the bowl without 36 of its players—some of whom were suspended as the school investigated improprieties in online testing for a music history course. The scandal involved athletes from multiple sports and brought unprecedented shame on the university.

"That online class stuff scares me to death," says one ACC head coach. "There doesn't seem to be a lot of security and guidelines to it. If you get an overzealous tutor and a lot of people involved, I could see where you could have problems."

Florida State concluded the investigation in February with the help of a consulting firm. The result: a self-imposed probation of two years, a cut in scholarships, more suspensions (several football players will sit out the first three games next season) and a reshuffled athletic department.

And the NCAA still is sniffing around, which means more penalties could be coming.

like the man. He's America's treasure, a fairytale figure who has aw-shucked his way to a place between Santa Claus and Andy Griffith in the Swell Guys Hall of Fame.

But Bowden's most important audience is his players. And for Bowden, it has come to this: He is more figurehead than feared leader. They respect him as a man, as a father figure. As a coach?

"I don't think I feared coach Bowden," says former FSU quarterback Adrian McPherson, who played last year for the Arena Football League's Grand Rapids Rampage. "I thought he was a great person and a great coach. But I wouldn't say I feared him."

The low point of Bowden's 32-year tenure at Florida State came last December in a 35-28 Music

City Bowl loss to Kentucky. FSU played the game without 36 players, many of whom were left home because the school was investigating the academic scandal.

It was fitting Florida State lost a "Who Cares? Bowl" against a traditional SEC tomato can. It was the rotted cherry on top of a second consecutive 7-6 season for the Seminoles, the worst two-year run in Bowden's FSU tenure.

"When I was there, it was a shock to lose," says Lorenzo Booker, a FSU running back from 2003-06. "Now, it's the same stuff."

What happened? There's no tidy answer. Blame stains many, including Bowden.

But he's not alone.

SN

Rix wasn't ready as a freshman, and a dynasty began to crumble.



Stability begins with a good quarterback

For so long, Florida State had a solid system with its quarterbacks: Sign the guy, sit him for a few seasons and make him the starter after he learns the position. The system began to thrive with Peter Tom Willis and continued with the likes of Casey Weldon, Charlie Ward, Danny Kanell, Thad Busby and Chris Weinke.

Then came freshman Chris Rix in 2001—Bobby Bowden's son Jeff's first year as offensive coordinator. Rix was not ready to start physically, and he wasn't ready mentally. But he started anyway. And then he became the face of the Seminoles' struggles.

After that, Florida State's tidy quarterbacking system was thrown into disarray because it misjudged some recruits and didn't land others. Quarterback hopefuls like Adrian McPherson, Wyatt Sexton and Xavier Lee couldn't make the grade. Drew Weatherford, the 2007 starter, is back this season, but the Seminoles are still searching for stability at a position that will be wide-open again this spring.

"They haven't had a quarterback," says an ACC head coach. "I think that has been their biggest problem."



Hart (left) and Wetherell might have disagreed on Bowden's status, but not his contributions to Florida State.

Whatever the weather, they're in it together

Dr. Thomas Kent "T.K." Wetherell. Go ahead, circle the name of Florida State's president with a red Sharpie.

He's a former 'Nole (1963-67) who still shares the school record for the longest kickoff return. And he also happens to worship at the altar of Bobby Bowden.

For better or worse, Wetherell has stood by his man, insisting Bowden will retire when he wants to retire. The message board maniacs and talk radio loons rant that T.K. should have KO'd Bowden yesterday. The end is now, mercifully, in sight, compliments of the Jimbo Fisher succession plan.

Wetherell wasn't done reshaping FSU's future after putting forth the plan. He parted ways over the winter with athletic director Dave Hart, who was bought out of the remaining 13 months of his contract. Hart, who held the post for 12 years, was portrayed by some as the guy who had a foot on Bowden's behind.

"I think (Bowden leaving on his own terms) has been stated clearly and publicly by the president many times," Hart says. "I don't think there is anything to be discussed there. You can't put a value on what Bobby has meant to FSU, both on the football field and the university."

Wetherell reached far to replace Hart, tabbing Utah State A.D. Randy Spetman, who had held the same post at Air Force from 1996-2003. He's the ultimate outsider, a no-nonsense retired Air Force colonel whom Wetherell hardly knew. Spetman's goal: to scrub the scum off Florida State.

"We need to re-establish academic integrity," says Spetman, who helped Utah State's athletic department reach the top of the Western Athletic Conference with a 78 percent graduation rate. "One of my top goals is to better integrate the athletic department and the academic arm of the university."

Jimbo: The fix-it man

Thinking about that day still makes Drew Weatherford shake his head.

It was a Thursday walk-through last season, a breezy affair in shorts and helmets. Florida State's quarterback was feeling good, hitting his passes and making his reads. Then, he missed badly—and it happened: Weatherford got the hook.

He was stunned.

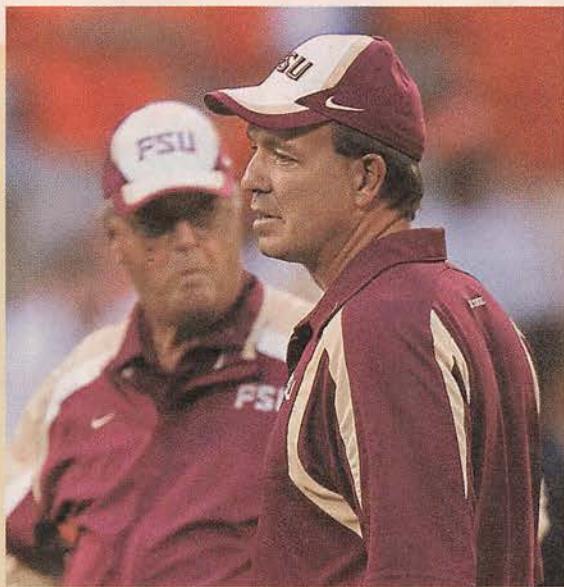
"That never used to happen before he got here," Weatherford says. "I couldn't believe it."

Welcome to life under offensive coordinator Jimbo Fisher, the man who is next in line to be king at Florida State. Commitment, accountability and discipline are the bedrock of his being. Those traits were only loosely applied at Florida State before Fisher arrived last season after a successful seven-year run as LSU's offensive coordinator.

Everyone walking the halls of the Moore Athletic Center is aware of what Fisher wants and demands. He's a commanding presence and a strong voice, elements that have been sorely missing during Florida State's slide this decade.

Fisher has helped effect change at every level of the program: recruiting and how weights are lifted, even the intensity and tempo of practices.

"I couldn't believe it when he first got here," says



Bowden (left), FSU's glorious past, and Fisher, its promising future, have different styles.

Weatherford. "You know how sometimes during practices there will be a lull? Well, there are none with him. The pace and rhythm of practices have been an eye-opener."

This is the frantic pace Fisher knows. The self-professed "hillbilly from West Virginia who drives

a pickup truck" talks fast and thinks even faster. He can't stop. He's a hard driver whose Cracker Barrel charm provides a buffer from the intimidating glare he exudes from behind wraparound shades. It's who he is: Jimbo. Not Jim, certainly not James. Just Jimbo.

Fisher's personality was shaped in large part by the Bowden family. He played for Terry Bowden, Bobby's son, at Salem College and Samford and later coached with him at Samford and Auburn. Fisher also worked the Bowden football camp for years.

Fisher's maniacal, single-minded obsession for perfection was forged in the blast furnace of Nick Saban's office when Saban was the coach at LSU.

Things were done two ways: Nick's way or the wrong way. That's also Fisher, a diabolical cocktail that bubbles over with possibilities.

"I know we can win big here again," says Fisher. "Nothing will stop us."

"Did I tell you about ..."

Fisher is rolling. And he's just getting started.

How FSU missed the Mark

December 26, 2000.

That was the day Georgia hired Florida State offensive coordinator Mark Richt as its head coach. That's also the day the Seminoles' vaunted football program began to decay.

The Seminoles capped that 2000 season by playing in the BCS championship game against Oklahoma, FSU's third straight shot at a national title. Florida State hasn't been back to the big game since.

Coincidence? No.

"Losing Richt hurt," says former FSU running back Lorenzo Booker. "We may have been running the same plays, but the offense wasn't called the same. When and why you call a play matters."

Bobby Bowden hasn't been actively involved in the offense since turning it over to Richt in 1994. In seven years running the offense, Richt molded two Heisman winners (Charlie Ward and Chris Weinke) and a high-powered attack that five times ranked among the top five scoring offenses in the nation.

Now? Florida State's offense ranked 80th last season with 369.4 yards per game, and it scored just 32 touchdowns. During Bowden's tenure at FSU, only two Seminoles teams have scored fewer—the 1981 (31) and 1976 (26) teams. And the 1976 team played just 11 games.

"They have two problems," says an ACC head coach. "They can't control the ball, and they lack big-play ability."

The son also rises—and falls

It was a disaster.

There's no other way to describe Florida State coach Bobby Bowden's decision to make son Jeff his offensive coordinator in 2001 after Mark Richt departed for Georgia.

"You're losing and coming into meetings hearing how it's your fault," says former FSU running back Lorenzo Booker. "But I always wondered, 'What are the coaches doing to get better?' It's a two-way street. We felt it was us losing the games, not the coaches.

"It was like they had no part in any of it. It was like they had no accountability. It was like Jeff Bowden was untouchable. It was like no one on the staff could criticize him. The defense always did its job. The guys on defense would get mad at us. But after a while, they understood."

Once the losses started to mount (four in 2001, five in 2002), the Seminoles lost their swagger. And, even worse: Opponents stopped fearing Florida State.

"I always thought it was an awkward situation to have Jeff coach receivers and be the coordinator," says current FSU quarterback Drew Weatherford. "When we were off meeting with our position coach, Jeff was with the receivers. He then had to get information from our quarterbacks coach after the offense got back together."

As the offense floundered, the pressure mounted on Bobby Bowden to do something about his son—like get rid of him. It finally happened after the 2006 season, when Jeff quelled the storm by resigning—with a \$500,000 buyout in hand. Florida State grabbed highly regarded LSU coordinator Jimbo Fisher to run the offense, but his fast and furious scheming yielded minimal results in his first season at Florida State.

"I'll tell you what we need," says Bobby Bowden. "We need a star. We need a Warrick Dunn, a Chris Weinke, a Derrick Brooks. We have started evaluating players better and like our chances."



Jeff Bowden took FSU's offense on an unpleasant ride.

The BIG PICTURE

Your guide to Selection Sunday

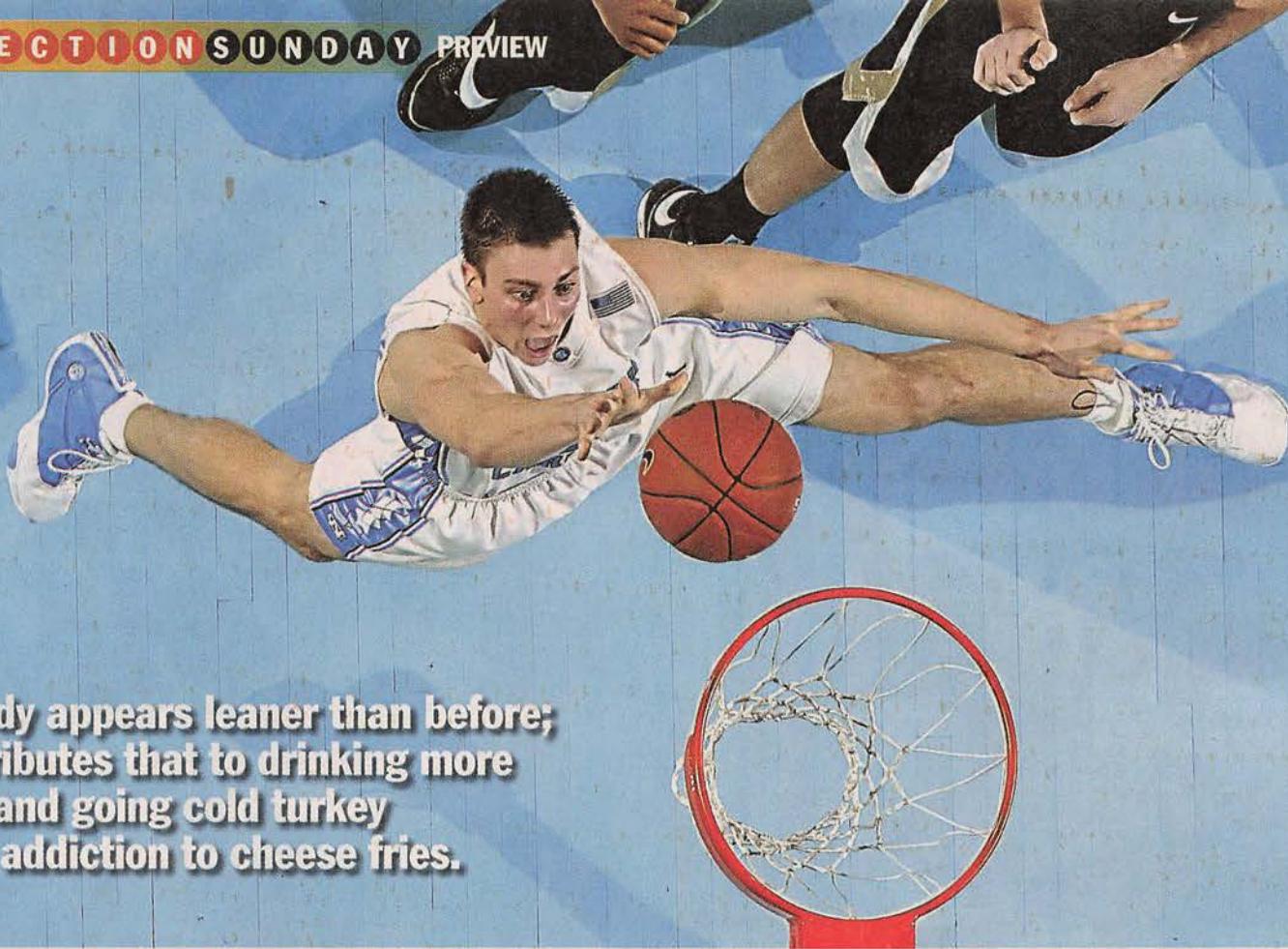
- 30 **Now hear this** Our experts sort through the questions that keep you up at night.
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That dude hogging the road to San Antonio? It's UNC's Tyler Hansbrough, and he wants an NCAA title. Really bad. *By Mike DeCourcy*

On Tyler Hansbrough's walk from the North Carolina locker room to the basketball court at the Dean E. Smith Center, a path he follows even on most off-days, he passes a montage of photographs celebrating the program's most recent NCAA championship. These photos reflect a glorious time in Tar Heels history, when Roy Williams and Sean May ruled at the 2005 Final Four, and they're filled with smiles, emphatic gestures and teammates embracing one another.

Hansbrough, frankly, is sick of it. There's more





His body appears leaner than before; he attributes that to drinking more water and going cold turkey on his addiction to cheese fries.

of this in the basketball office suite, specifically on assistant coach Steve Robinson's door, and Hansbrough would like to make it all go away. "He says there's one way you can get those pictures down, and that's to win a national championship," Hansbrough says. "I'm ready for them to take it down. That would mean we'd won it."

If this group of Tar Heels is to capture the program's fifth NCAA title, Hansbrough will be at the center of the picture. "He's carried me for three years," Williams says. Hansbrough has been Carolina's leading scorer and rebounder each of his three seasons but more so has provided a constant source of energy as the Tar Heels have won nearly 83 percent of their games. Few players are as driven as Hansbrough, and seeing him work pushes everyone in the UNC program to spend a little more of themselves.

It already appeared Hansbrough had the volume of his intensity and production blaring at 10 when point guard Ty Lawson went down with a high ankle sprain in early February. But there was more in there. "There were a lot of guys maybe looking at me to take a bigger role," Hansbrough says. During Lawson's absence, including the Florida State game he departed barely 4 minutes into, Hansbrough averaged 28.0 points and 12.1 rebounds. Already an overpowering scorer along the baseline, he at last demonstrated his improvement as a jump shooter—heeding the constant

encouragement of assistant Joe Holladay to put all his extra shooting practice to use.

In the first of two overtime wins against Clemson, Hansbrough was surrounded by defenders and was held to only 14 points, one of the better defensive jobs anyone did against him this season. Then, even with Lawson missing from the second meeting, Hansbrough wrecked the Tigers for 39 points.

"He doesn't adjust. He just keeps coming. And we didn't," Clemson coach Oliver Purnell says. "He's the best player in college basketball."

For part of the season, Hansbrough played with an infected toe that had to be drained three times in five days. (Once, the doctor inadvertently pushed the needle not just through the nail but down through Hansbrough's toe and out the other side). Eventually, the nail was removed. Williams ordered him off the practice floor after the procedure, the only session Hansbrough has missed in his career.

His body appears leaner than before; he attributes that to drinking more water and going cold turkey on his addiction to cheese fries. "I was reading an article in *Men's Health*," he says. "It's rated the No. 1 worst food in America." The punishment Hansbrough inflicts on himself is a small part of the pain he absorbs. At Georgia Tech, he proudly wore several scratches and a cut lip during an on-camera postgame interview. His phosphorescent forearms frequently are red with evidence of mal-

treatment in the lane.

Amazingly, he confronts whatever abuse he takes with silence. Hansbrough contends it is best not to show his anger but to feed off it and play more assertively. "Ninety-five percent of the players in college and the NBA would have reacted 25 times in his three years here in a very physical, overly aggressive and fighting manner," Williams says. Hansbrough lost his temper once, when a flying elbow from Duke's Gerald Henderson broke his nose.

"He's an unusual bird," Williams says. "I wish I were intelligent enough to give you a better terminology."

There is one thing about Hansbrough no different from most athletes. He dreams of glory. He wants to see pictures of Heels claiming the 2008 championship in San Antonio adorning the walls of the Carolina basketball complex. He'd also like to see his name and number lifted to the end zone rafters—near those of Michael Jordan and Phil Ford—and it will happen. Hansbrough's name will become the eighth at the front of the line, all honoring national players of the year. His winning *SPORTING NEWS*' award made it official.

"I look up there every practice, pretty much," Hansbrough says. "You see Michael Jordan, all the great players who have come through here. You always think about what you can do to help this team."

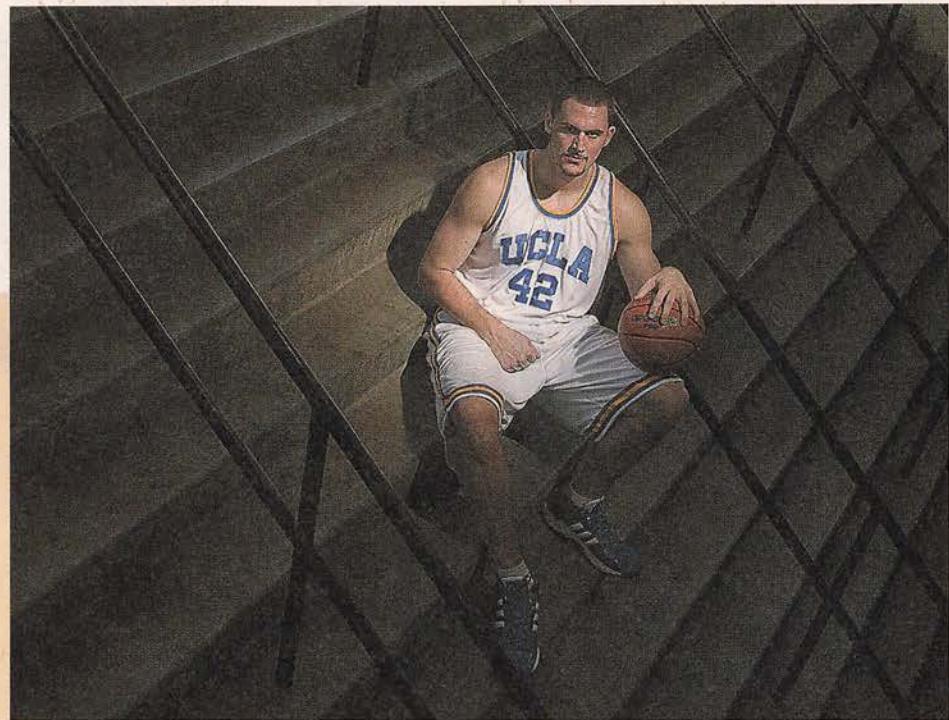
"It just drives you."

IN FOCUS

Three more guys who could carry their teams all the way

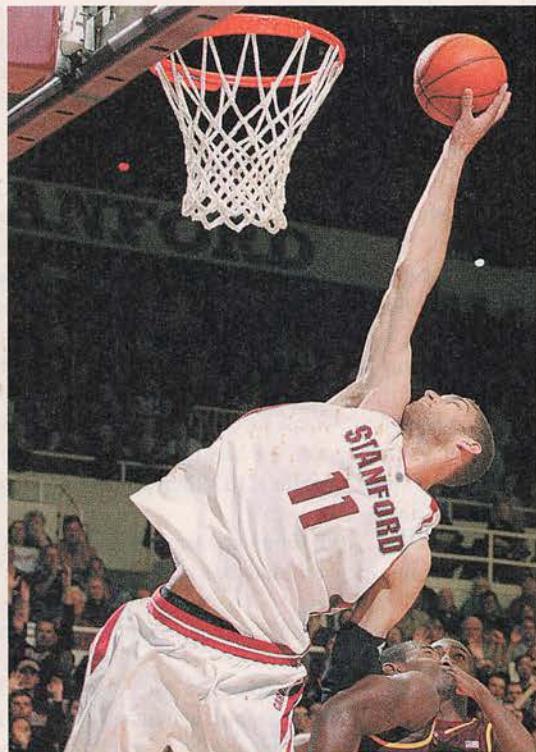
Kevin Love, UCLA

Though UCLA reached the past two Final Fours, its offense was too perimeter-bound to produce a title. Recruiting Love gave the Bruins an anchor on offense; he entered the week having scored in double figures in every game. The presence of a consistent low-post force helped Florida, North Carolina and Connecticut win the past four titles. "From my watching Kevin Love over the years, the one thing he does better than anybody I've watched—he wins," says Van Coleman of Hoopmasters.com. "And it's never about him."



Chris Douglas-Roberts, Memphis

If there were a statistical category for "least shots forced," Douglas-Roberts would be your national leader. He can take over a game—he reached 30 points in the Tigers' two toughest Conference USA road games—but not at the cost of playing selfishly. Though a 44.2 percent 3-point shooter, he attempts fewer than three per game. Which is why he hits 44.2 percent. "I'm just not going to force shots," he says. "I'm not just going to come and jack a ball."



Brook Lopez, Stanford

If he had played the entire season, Lopez would be among the leading candidates for All-American honors. A guy who missed nine games to get his grades right isn't going to get much slack, but Lopez has the ability to dominate the game at both ends of the floor. He has become a terrific low-post option and has moments where he refuses to allow opponents to get off a shot.

Now hear this

Tennessee gets a No. 1 seed, Duke loses early, Louisville sneaks up on everybody. It all makes sense, right?

You don't get to call yourself an expert if you wait until the bracket comes out and then make your picks. When we convened a roundtable tourney discussion with *SPORTING NEWS* writers Mike DeCourcy and Ryan Fagan, ESPN analyst Jay Bilas and Jerry Palm of CollegeRPI.com, we told them we weren't willing to wait until Selection Sunday to get all the answers.

OK, so who are the No. 1 seeds?

DeCOURCY: I've got UCLA, Memphis, North Carolina and Tennessee. There's no question in my mind that Kansas has better talent and more of the right components to win the national title than the Vols, but the Jayhawks have not gotten it done in big games this year. Of course, they didn't play many, but that's how it goes. You have to earn these seeds, and on the way into the Big 12 Tournament, KU still had not.

BILAS: UCLA, North Carolina, Memphis and Kansas—because they're the four best teams in the country.

PALM: Tennessee, North Carolina, Memphis and UCLA.

FAGAN: North Carolina, Tennessee, Memphis and UCLA. The Bruins have shown a vulnerable side the past month, but they also have proved their mettle in some close wins. Surviving in those pressure situations only will help them in the tournament.

Of the teams in the mix for a No. 1 or No. 2 seed, which has the best chance of an early exit?

PALM: Georgetown. I think they're a bit soft and don't play with much passion. Of course, every time I think that, they do something like come

back to beat Marquette on the road.

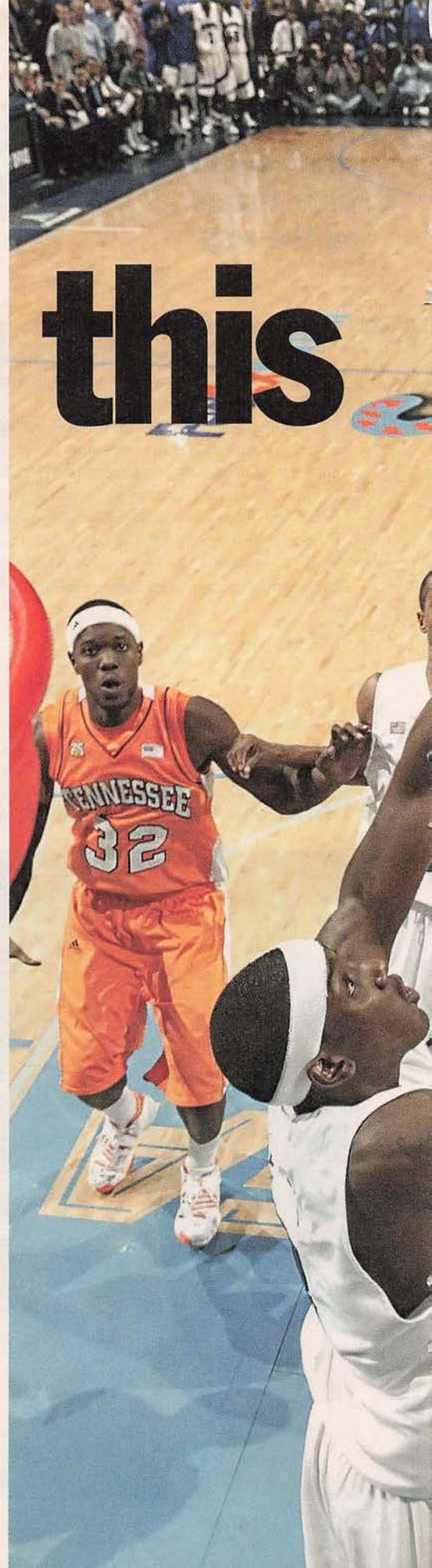
BILAS: It's the teams that rely on perimeter shooting—and the teams that are not as solid defensively—that have a chance to get clipped. A team like Texas or even Tennessee. I think Duke is in that boat, where if they don't shoot it particularly well, they're subject to getting upset.

DeCOURCY: Georgetown has tremendous talent, but the Hoyas keep putting themselves in jeopardy against teams that are no better than the No. 7 or 8 seeds they'll see in the tournament's second round. I still don't believe their offensive system takes full advantage of their firepower. They're great at coming up with winning plays in close games, but you can't argue against the idea that they've been very fortunate.

FAGAN: Duke. The Blue Devils were vulnerable in the last month of the regular season, losing three times and needing a huge comeback against N.C. State to avoid a fourth loss. Coach K has learned to mask the offense's lack of a true post presence, but weaknesses have a way of being exploited in the tournament.

Who is your dark horse to win the title—to match what Florida achieved in 2006?

BILAS: Probably Louisville. They have seven losses, but they're better than seven losses.





Chris Lofton and the Volunteers could be the type of perimeter-oriented No. 1 seed that is vulnerable to an upset.

FAGAN: Stanford. The twin Lopez towers create huge matchup issues, and the depth of the supporting cast makes the Cardinal a legitimate threat.

DeCOURCY: If there's a team that can come out of the shadows and into the title game, it's Connecticut. They've got an outstanding point guard, a shot-blocking center, depth at guard and extraordinary athleticism. There's a pretty decent drop-off between UConn's starting frontcourt and the guys who replace them, so the Huskies can't afford foul trouble for Hasheem Thabeet and Jeff Adrien. But if they're lucky there, I could see them upsetting some big-time teams.

PALM: Louisville. They were a preseason top 10 team that had a rough couple of months because of injuries. They are now playing like we thought they would but might not get that high of a seed.

What player do you think will have the biggest impact on his team's NCAA Tournament fortunes?

DeCOURCY: Kevin Love changes every game he plays in. His ability to be strong in the post, to occupy space defensively and collect defensive rebounds, to pass in the halfcourt and to ignite fast breaks—there's nobody like him in college basketball. Usually post players like him find their way deep into the tournament.

PALM: Michael Beasley. No team depends on one guy more.

FAGAN: D.J. Augustin. First off, Texas isn't as star-centric as it was with Kevin Durant last season. Augustin is vastly improved after a strong offseason, and his teammates rely on him not only to score but also to distribute the ball and make the offense hum. When he's playing better, his teammates are playing better.

What is the most important quality in a national championship team?

DeCOURCY: I believe it's the ability to manufacture baskets when the defense takes away your system and you have to rely on your players' ingenuity and confidence. Scouting and game preparation are so good in the NCAA Tournament that it's going to be hard to run your stuff by the fifth or sixth game. That's when talent takes over, so long as that talent is applied for the sake of the team and not just for somebody to get his 20 points.

BILAS: Well, you can't live without talent, but I'd say experience together, a team that has played together and has been through it together.

PALM: NBA first-round draft choice talent. It's been over 20 years since someone won the title without it.

Pick one matchup you would like to see more than any other.

DeCOURCY: Stanford against Tennessee in an

Elite Eight or a Sweet 16 game. They're almost total opposites. Stanford brings the inside power against the Vols' depth and athleticism at guard. Stanford is happy to play in the 50s or 60s, and Tennessee wants that by halftime. Stanford got clobbered when it played a pressing team, Louisville, in last year's first round. It'd be interesting to see how far the Cardinal have come.

BILAS: I'd like to see UCLA and North Carolina play. To see Kevin Love and Tyler Hansbrough go at it—and all those guards—that'd be great. But I'd love to see UCLA and Kansas go at it, too. I watched that last year; it was a great game.

FAGAN: Louisville vs. Tennessee.

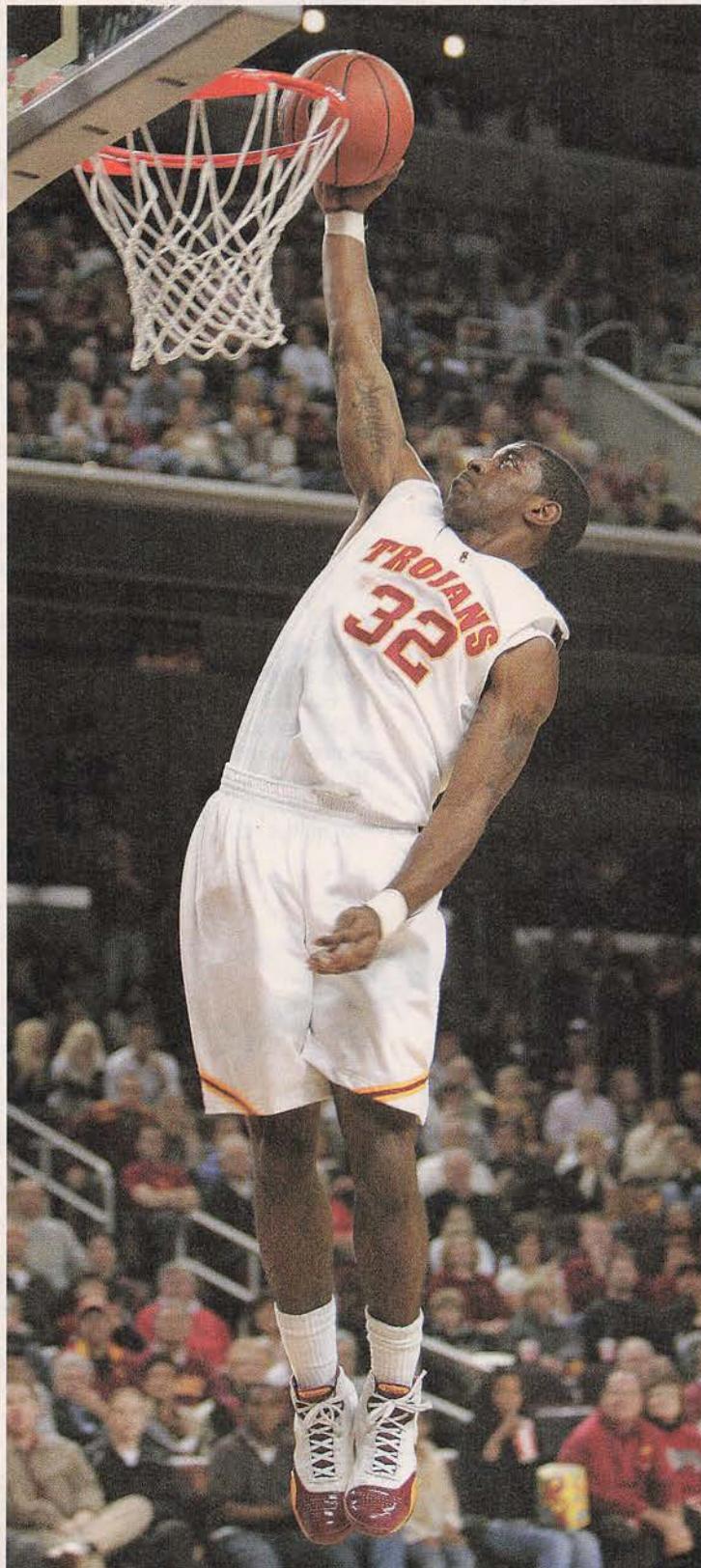
PALM: You mean besides Purdue vs. anyone in the Final Four? North Carolina vs. Kansas State. Let Michael Beasley and Tyler Hansbrough decide player of the year head-to-head.

What change would you make to the selection process?

DeCOURCY: I'd get rid of the "last 12 games" component. It's a crutch. The committee members know there's no statistical correlation between how a team finishes the season and how it performs in the NCAAs. It's been proved over and over again, year after year, but so far they've refused to get rid of it. If they know finishing strong has no impact, then it should have no more bearing on whether a team is selected than whether its coach is bald or if the dance team has nice uniforms. It's the one element of the process that feels dishonest.

PALM: I don't really have any significant issue with the process. I suppose I'd probably put less emphasis on how a team finishes and a little more on balance of power in the bracketing process.

BILAS: I'd have the committee be made up of people who have basketball experience—playing or coaching—and I would not have people on the committee who have not had significant basketball experience.



O.J. Mayo and the Trojans will have to fight through some tough matchups to make it to the Sweet 16.

Which conference will get the most teams to the Sweet 16?

DeCOURCY: The Big East will get at least three: Georgetown, Louisville and Connecticut—and Marquette and Notre Dame have a shot with the right draw. The Pac-10 has a chance to get four, but Southern California is going to have to fight through a seed that probably won't be better than No. 6 and Washington State has to rediscover offensive consistency.

FAGAN: I don't necessarily think the Pac-10 is the strongest top-to-bottom conference in the country, but it has four teams—UCLA, Stanford, Washington State and Southern California—that easily could make it that far.

PALM: The Big East. It'll probably have five or six teams seeded in the 1-to-6 range, so there is a numeric advantage.

Do you consider this field of 34 at-large teams strong or weak?

DeCOURCY: I like the top teams, but the middle of the field is the least accomplished I can remember. There's an immense drop-off from the first 10 or 12 teams to the next level below, and there's a pretty fair difference between teams such as UCLA and Kansas and those in the second group. There will be teams that make this field that wouldn't have had a chance in most other years. The bubble teams just aren't good. There's no other way to put it.

BILAS: I don't ever consider it weak. I think it's a strong field, or at least a strong group of candidates. I don't think this has been a year of dominant teams, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have depth with good teams. There are a bunch of good teams.

PALM: Among the weakest I've seen. With two weeks left, I was putting about a dozen teams in my projected brackets that didn't really have tournament-quality profiles. There are always a handful like that, but this year is much worse.

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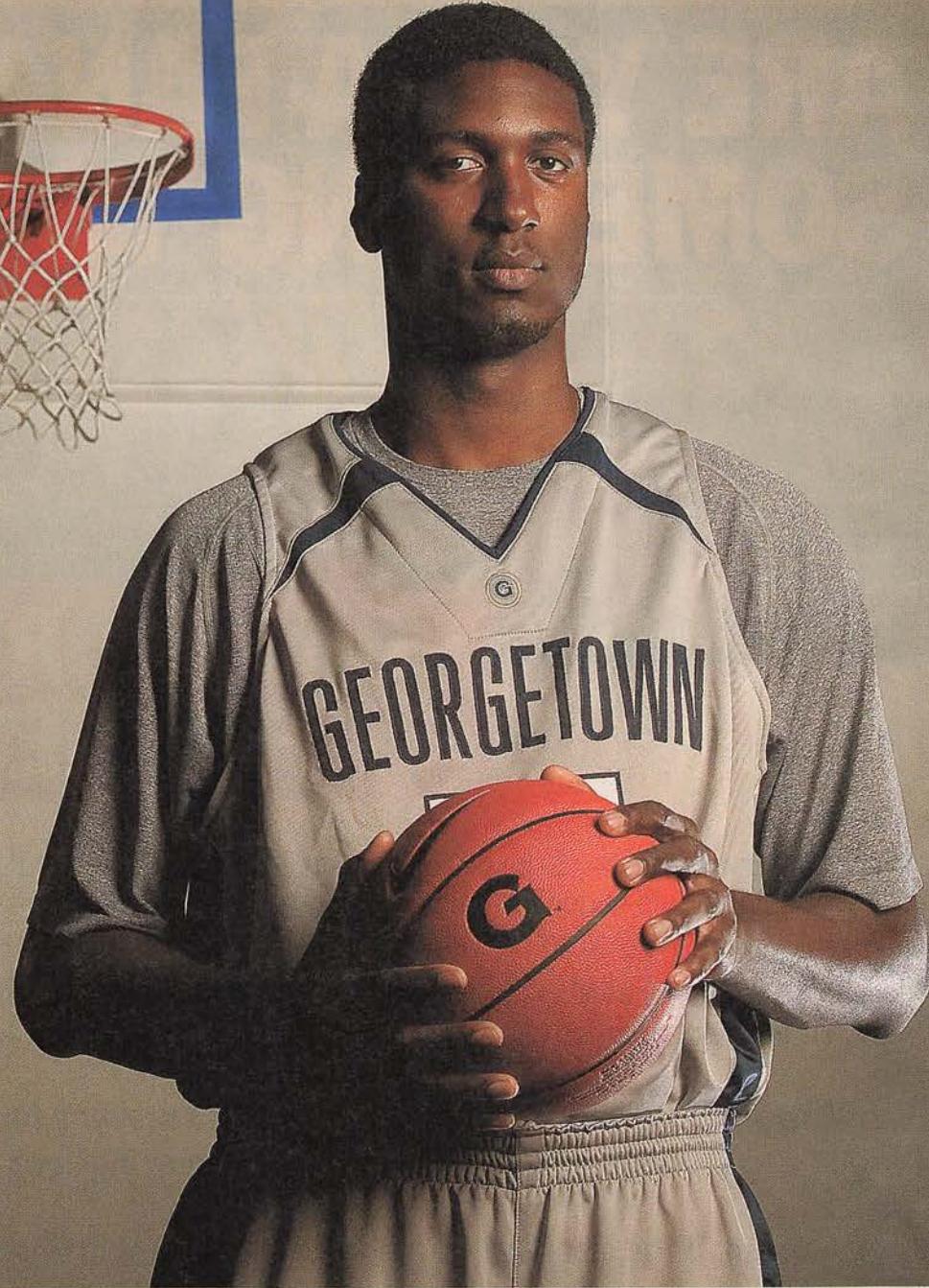
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No
Dunking



Hibbert is hitting 60 percent of his shots, but the Hoyas would be a greater threat if he took more of them.

Scouting the field

We project
the group of 65
—plus give you
a few players,
teams and trends
to know and love
By Ryan Fagan

From A to Xavier

Alabama State

American

Arizona

Arizona State

Arkansas

Austin Peay

Baylor A spot in the NCAA Tournament is nothing short of remarkable for a program that was mentally exhausted—and whose roster had been emptied—when coach Scott Drew arrived five years ago. A high-powered offense led by Curtis Jerrells makes the Bears more than just a feel-good story.

Belmont

Boise State

Butler

BYU Led by the junior duo of guard Lee Cummard and center Trent Plaisted, the Cougars have reached the 25-win plateau for the second consecutive season.

Clemson

Connecticut

Cornell

Davidson

Drake

Duke

Georgetown Hoyas big man

Roy Hibbert can be dominant, but he's averaging just 8.6 shots per game. Georgetown's ability to advance through the tournament will depend on a talented supporting cast's ability to produce.

George Mason

Gonzaga

Illinois State

Indiana For better or worse, this has been a season Hoosiers fans will never forget. A deep run into the NCAA Tournament would make the memory a fond one, and you can bet senior D.J. White will do everything in his power to make that happen.

Kansas

Kansas State

Kent State

Kentucky

Louisville

Marquette The Golden Eagles were just 1-5 against the top four teams in the Big East, but with guards Dominic James, Jerel McNeal and Wesley Matthews in their third year together, now is the time to make a run.

Massachusetts

Maryland-Baltimore County

Memphis

Miami

Michigan State

Mississippi Ole Miss has a great senior post player in Dwayne Curtis, who clears the boards, and a sensational freshman guard in Chris Warren, who pushes the tempo. The Rebels' SEC record (7-9) isn't great, but they're 6-3 against teams in the RPI top 50.

Mississippi State

Morgan State

North Carolina

Notre Dame

Ohio State

Oklahoma

Oral Roberts

Oregon

Pitt The Panthers have two great wins—against Duke and Georgetown—but injuries have killed their consistency. Still, with Sam Young averaging 18.0 points, Levance Fields back at full strength and a veteran roster, Pitt is a team to be feared.

Portland State

Purdue

Sacred Heart

Siena

South Alabama

Southern California

The Trojans are loaded with talented players, but pay close attention to point guard Daniel Hackett. He has been slowed by a back injury. Hackett was the unsung hero in last season's run to the Sweet 16, and his all-around ability could lift USC again this year.

Stanford

Stephen F. Austin

St. Mary's

Syracuse

Tennessee

Texas

Texas A&M

UCLA

UC Santa Barbara

UNLV

Vanderbilt

Washington State

West Virginia

Winthrop

Wisconsin Bo Ryan's teams are always dangerous in the tournament, and this year is no different. Big man Brian Butch can score inside or outside, and Trevor Hughes, Marcus Landry and Michael Flowers are all capable of hitting big shots.

Xavier

NIT pickings

Some teams didn't get enough done to go to the Big Dance, but there's always the Big Apple.

Florida. The two-time defending champs' nonconference schedule was weak, and they just don't have enough quality wins.

Maryland. The Terps have a big win against North Carolina. Unfortunately, a good run during the middle of the season was sandwiched between a bad start and a poor finish.

Saint Joseph's. The Hawks, like several Atlantic 10 teams, struggled through a mini-collapse in the second half of the season.

Southern Illinois. There will be no upsets for the Salukis this time around. An early exit in the Missouri Valley tournament sealed their fate.

Western Kentucky. Courtney Lee is a great playmaker, but the Hilltoppers don't have any wins against RPI top 100 teams.

UAB, Houston. Both Conference USA schools have good records, but neither could topple Memphis

or do much outside of the league.

White has
to get the
Hoosiers
turned around
in a hurry.



Multibid leagues

Big East: 8

Pac-10: 7

Big 12: 6

SEC: 6

Big Ten: 5

ACC: 4

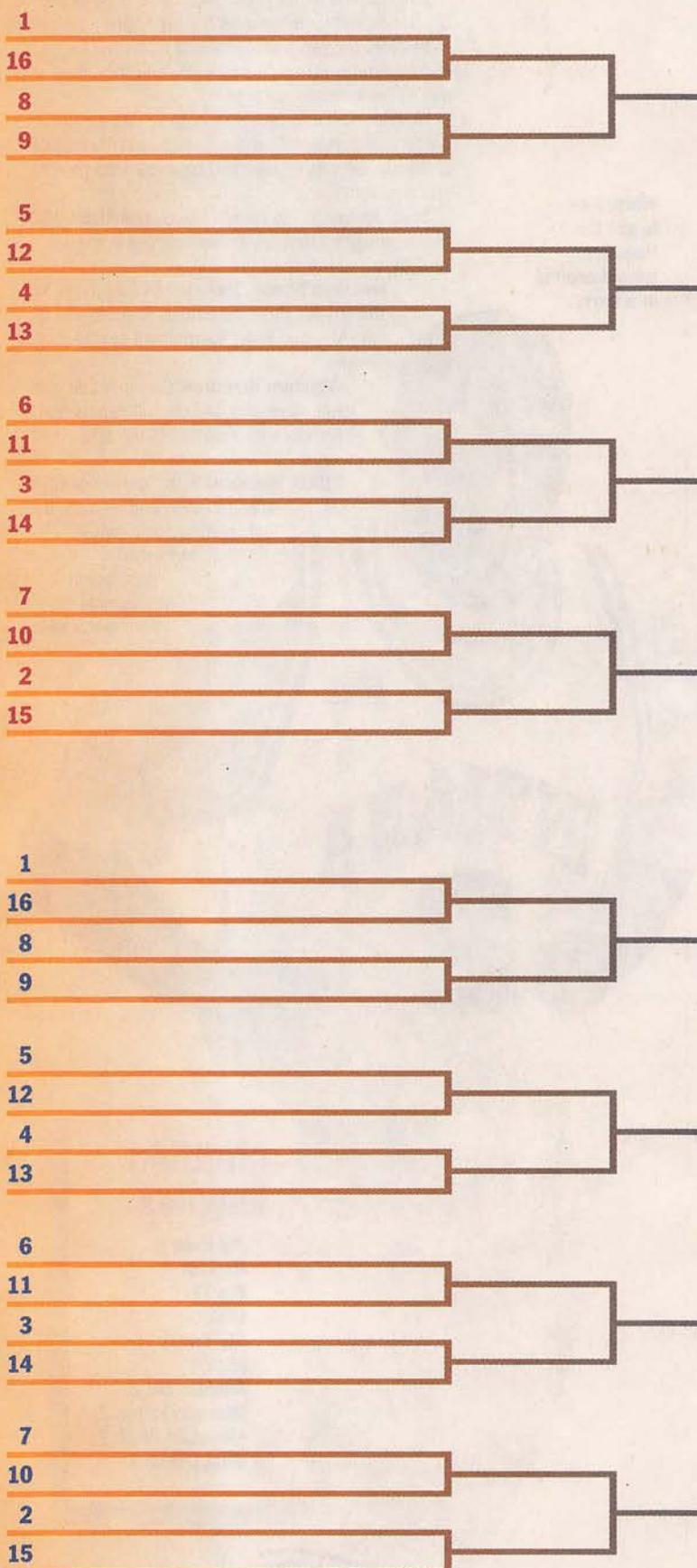
Atlantic 10: 2

Missouri Valley: 2

Mountain West: 2

West Coast: 2

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Sporting News Radio As part of 12 hours of tourney-related programming on Selection Sunday, Bob Berger and Bob Stetton will count down to the announcement, then fill in and analyze the brackets as they're revealed. Then Tim Brando will take over to bring you a special tournament preview, "March to San Antonio," from 7 to 10 p.m. ET with all the reaction from the biggest coaches, best players and smartest analysts.

Listen all of Selection Sunday (10 a.m. to 10 p.m.) and throughout the tournament by tuning in online at radio.sporting-news.com, to XM Radio Channel 144 or to Sirius Channel 123.



CHAM

TOURNAMENT

March 16

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship Selection Show, 6 p.m. ET (CBS)

Opening round

March 18—Dayton, Ohio

First and second rounds

March 20 and 22—Anaheim; Denver; Omaha, Neb.; Washington, D.C.

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CHAMPION

DATES AND SITES

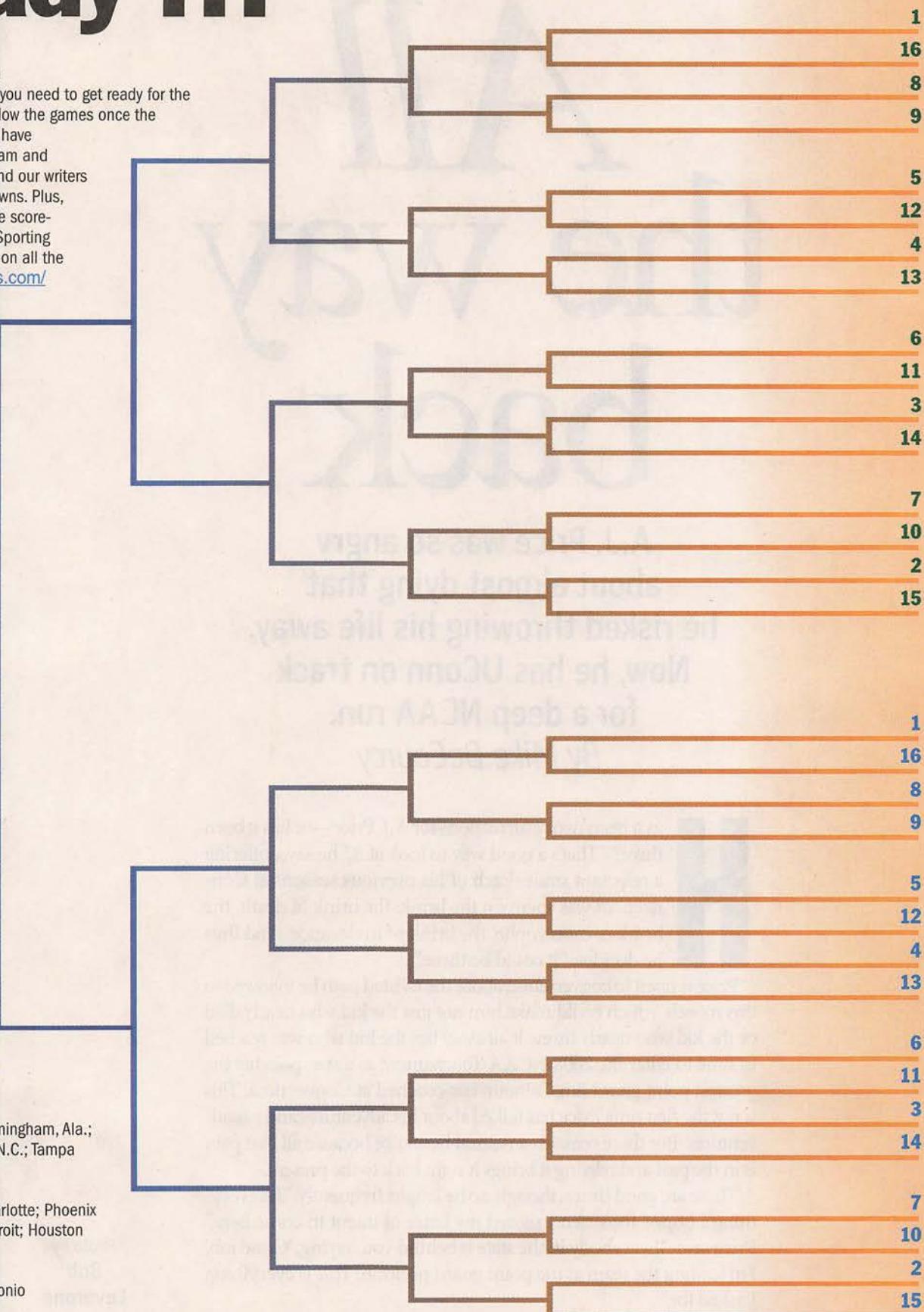
March 21 and 23—Birmingham, Ala.; Little Rock, Ark.; Raleigh, N.C.; Tampa

Regionals

March 27 and 29—Charlotte; Phoenix
March 28 and 30—Detroit; Houston

Final Four

April 5 and 7—San Antonio



All the way back

A.J. Price was so angry about almost dying that he risked throwing his life away.

Now, he has UConn on track for a deep NCAA run.

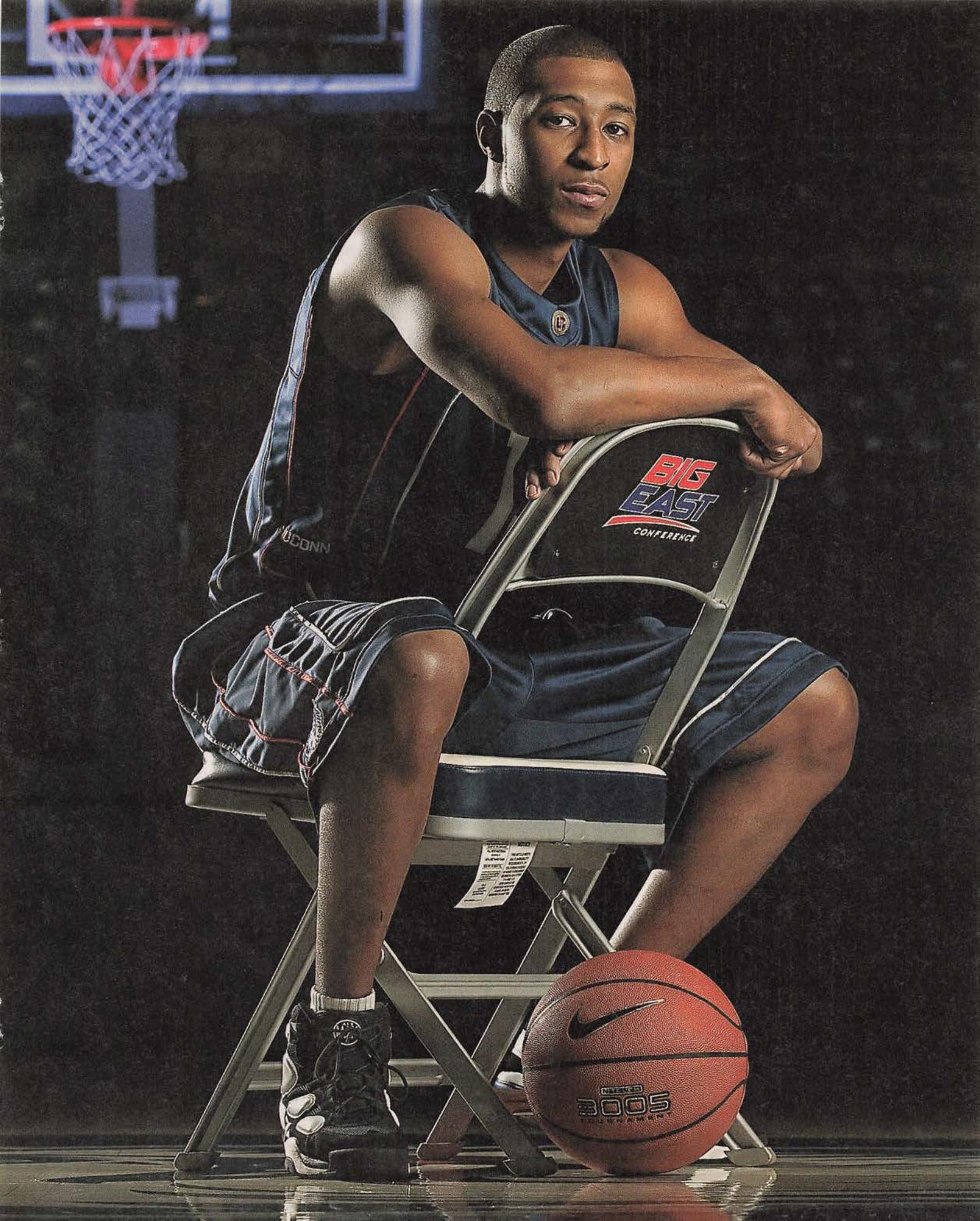
By Mike DeCourcy

Has it been two resurrections for A.J. Price—or has it been three? “That’s a good way to look at it,” he says, offering a reluctant smile. Each of his previous seasons at Connecticut was spent on the brink: the brink of death, the brink of catastrophe, the brink of irrelevance. And thus he decides: “It could be three.”

Price is open to conversation about the twisted path he followed to this month, which could make him not just the kid who nearly died or the kid who nearly threw it all away but the kid who was rescued in time to enter the 2008 NCAA Tournament as a star, possibly the greatest point guard Jim Calhoun has coached at Connecticut. This is not the first time Price has talked about his adventures and misadventures. But there remains a natural hesitance because all that pain is in the past and reliving it brings it right back to the present.

These are good times, though, so he laughs frequently. “It’s everything I hoped for when I signed my letter of intent to come here,” Price says. “Everybody in the state is behind you, saying, ‘Good job.’ I’m leading the team at the point guard position. This is everything I asked for.”

*Photo by
Bob
Leverone*



BIG
EAST
CONFERENCE

NIKE
3005

Tubes, wires and microwaves

Price remembers as much as you do about the brain ailment that nearly took his life in October 2004. You weren't there. He wasn't, either. After feeling ill and complaining of flu-like symptoms, he was taken to a team physician. He woke up nearly two weeks later, tubes and wires attached to his body. He figured he was in a hospital room. It took his father, Tony, a little while to stop crying and explain.

Price had fallen ill because of a brain hemorrhage, which doctors concluded was caused by an arteriovenous malformation—a birth defect that chose the eve of his freshman season at UConn to declare itself and change the course of his life. This was treated with radiosurgery, a process that destroys the defect with a concentrated surge of radiation. Price estimates he endured 13 angiograms to check his progress. Which is worse than it sounds.

"It feels like your head is in the microwave," Price says. "They enter through your groin with a catheter, shoot dye up into your brain so they can get pictures of what's going on. It gets really, really hot—intense. It lasts about 10 seconds, then it stops. Then they have to do it again ... about 10 times."

This cost him his freshman season, which hurt more than anything. Price said all the right things at a news conference during his recovery: about how he cherished life now, recognized what was important, valued his family more than ever before.

It all looked like a happy ending and a fresh beginning for Price. Indeed, that's how it looked.

'Doing stupid stuff'

Of all the crowd harassment aimed at Price during his first season playing at UConn—after he'd missed 2004-05 because of his illness and the subsequent season as punishment for his involvement in the on-campus theft of laptop computers—what stung most was hearing the word "thief" chanted in his direction.

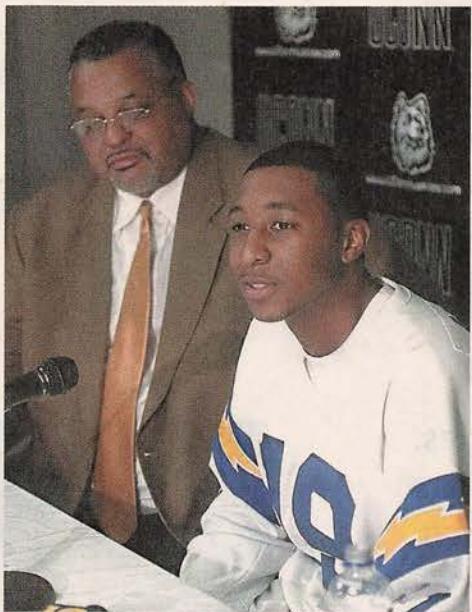
He does not think of himself that way. "Even though I got in trouble for it, I know my situation. I didn't steal any laptops," Price says. "I didn't physically go into anyone's room to steal anything." He does not deny his connection to the incident, though. He does not deny he acted foolishly, recklessly, stupidly.

It seemed then like such a waste. He'd come so close to dying. How could he abuse the gift of a second chance by doing something so ridiculous? What would a stolen computer be worth? "I wasn't thinking rationally at the time," he says. "I wasn't thinking about any of the consequences, anything that could happen to me."

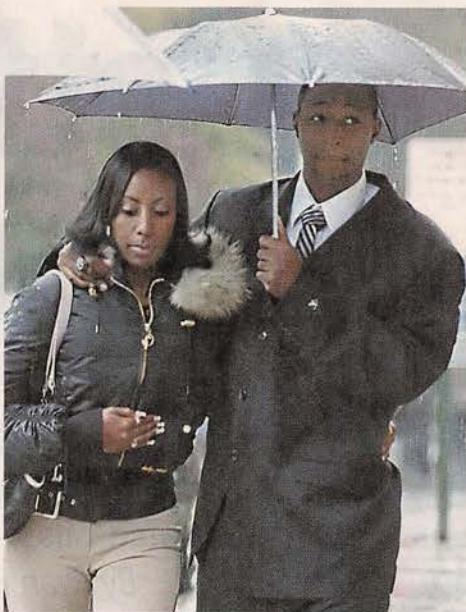
When Price explains how he came to be in that circumstance, his intention is not to excuse his



Price's release makes him tough to defend on 3-point attempts—he hit five of eight against West Virginia—and his ability to run the offense and provide leadership gets his teammates going.



2004 During a news conference in November, Price and his father, Tony, answered questions about Price's illness, his treatment and his recovery, which caused him to miss his freshman season.



2005 Price was put on 18 months probation and required to do 400 hours of community service for his role in the theft of laptop computers from dorm rooms. He was suspended for the season by the school.



2008 Price's mother, Inga, says one of the biggest lessons he had to learn after struggling last season was to be patient. This season, that patience is paying dividends.

Of all the crowd harassment aimed at Price during his first season playing, what stung most was hearing the word '**thief**' chanted in his direction.

behavior. It does not need to be excused. He has been punished. But to understand who he is today and how he came to be that person, it is essential to examine how he reacted to having basketball, the gift that defined him for most of his years, ripped from his routine.

His parents couldn't see the difference in him. Joy was getting in the way. "We were just so happy to see he was gaining his weight back and anticipating going back to school," says Price's mother, Inga.

But he wasn't relieved at still being alive. He was furious to have been afflicted. He wasn't hopeful about basketball. He feared he would never be the same. "I was trying a lot of different things, doing stupid stuff," he says. It wasn't just the laptop. The other shenanigans remain his secret. They also remain in his past.

Calhoun hopes they stay there and trusts they will. He was predictably blasted in the media for keeping Price but felt there was something worth saving. "I believed in him and his family, and given the inside information I did have, I kind of knew what he did was stupid, but it wasn't malicious," Calhoun says. "I told him, 'Never thank me for

stepping in and defending you because I did that voluntarily. The thanks will be when I see the A.J. Price that I know is in there. I'm seeing a lot more of that now. He's a leader on the team. I think he's given our team some courage."

Working his way back

Two years were gone, and yet Price expected everything to be the same when he returned. The rims still were 10 feet high, but he was nowhere near the same player. "I felt terrible," he says. "My legs felt shot."

"I was written off. A lot of people thought I didn't have it—thought I lost it or never had it in the first place."

He averaged 9.4 points, shot lousy. Calhoun yanked Price out of games as if using a remote control to change channels. "A.J. wasn't handling it very well," Inga Price says. "Everything takes time in life, but it's very difficult to teach a 20-year-old patience."

It's maybe not so hard to teach someone so young to work, though. As soon as the Huskies were eliminated from the 2007 Big East Tournament, he began a workout regimen that included

distance running, weightlifting and running stadium stairs to get his body back into condition. He barely touched a ball for a month.

"He had to learn how to fight through some things last year, and it was good for him," Calhoun says. "In high school, he never was a hard worker. He is a hard worker now. Those things are all great signs for me."

With his body back, his play has followed. His game is unassuming, almost silent. For a team that was expected to struggle but rallied to challenge for the Big East regular-season title, he averages 14.9 points and 6.0 assists and makes nearly 38 percent of his 3-pointers, partly because he stretches so far back on his release that defenders can't reach to bother him. "He's improved a lot," says West Virginia point guard Darris Nichols. "I remember last year he kind of struggled."

Price has come back, back, back—three resurrections. Back to life, back to living, back to playing basketball with the quality that defines him. "I made the decision to come back here," he says, "because I didn't want to have the memory of leaving here as a 'thief.' Or 'the guy just didn't pan out.' I wanted it to happen here."



Getting to know you

Five faces. Five stories.
Five more reasons
to watch this March.

By Ryan Fagan

David Padgett Louisville

It's hard to imagine that many folks outside the Big 12 remember this moment, but way back at the end of the 2003-04 regular season, Kansas and Missouri were locked in a classic to-the-death battle in the final game at the Hearnes Center in Columbia. In a matchup dominated by upperclassmen—MU senior Arthur Johnson had 37 points and KU junior Wayne Simien had 22—it was a lanky Jayhawks freshman who swished a 10-footer from the baseline with 2 seconds left to give Kansas an emotional victory.

Yeah, Padgett knows a thing or two about coming through in the clutch.

Padgett wasn't the first or second option on that play against Mizzou, but he was in the right place at the right time and rose to the occasion. He has made a career of being in the right place at the right time at Louisville—he transferred there from Kansas before his sophomore season—and he has climbed the depth chart to become a team leader and primary scoring option. With Padgett in the lineup this season, Louisville is 15-4. While he was out 10 games because of a knee injury, the Cardinals were just 7-3.

He's a magician around the basket, able to use either hand, and has an array of spin moves and hook shots. He's also an excellent passer. Despite a history of knee troubles, Padgett is more mobile than most of the big men he'll go up against in the tournament, which will create matchup issues for anyone who faces the Cardinals.



LEFT: UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE; JEFF JACOBSEN

Brandon Rush Kansas

He wasn't supposed to be wearing a Kansas uniform this season. He was supposed to be a first-round pick in last summer's NBA draft, and right about now he would have been looking for his second wind as the professional season heads into its stretch run. But he tore his right ACL in a pickup game last May and withdrew his name from consideration for the draft. It was the second time he'd withdrawn from the draft—he also did so before he enrolled as a freshman at KU.

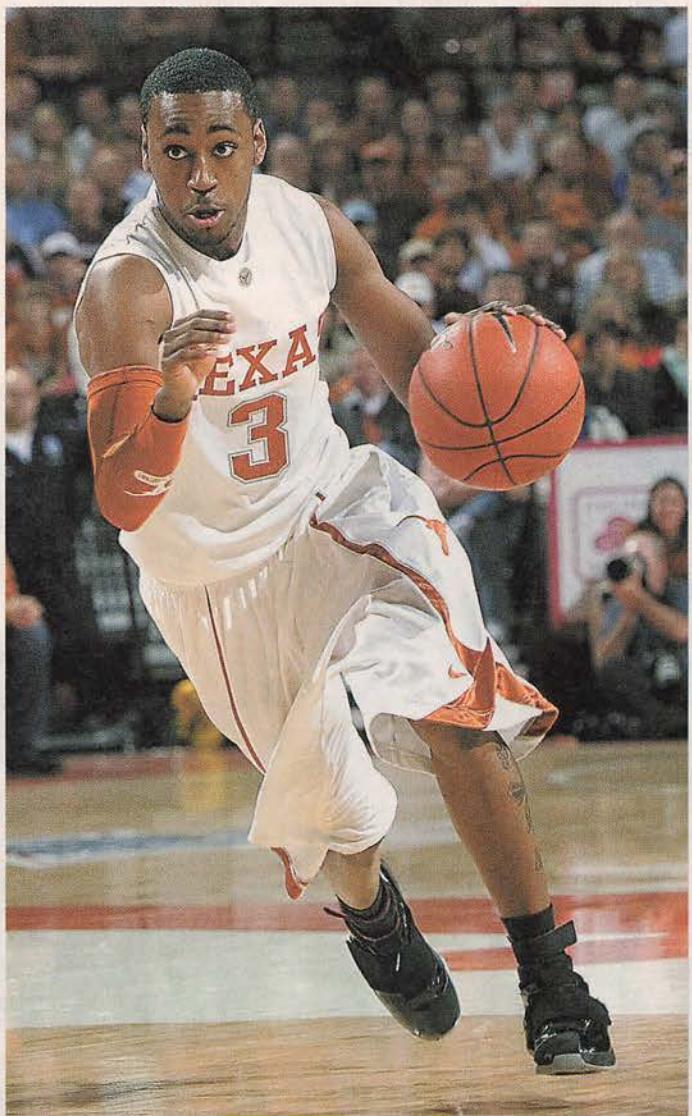
So maybe Rush wasn't supposed to be a Jayhawk in March 2008. But here he is, and the Jayhawks are legitimate contenders for the national title, in no small part because of his efforts to rehab and get ready for the season. As late as the middle of October, coach Bill Self

was concerned it would take a month or two for Rush, a junior, to "get the pop back in his step." In his third game back, November 25 against Arizona, Rush scored 17 points and grabbed eight rebounds in a 4-point victory.

Rush has been criticized throughout his career for not shooting as much as some KU fans would like, but he's an unselfish player and the Jayhawks have a deep, talented roster. He's averaging 12.3 points—one of four players averaging at least 11.8—but more important, the Jayhawks are 28-3. "He's played great," ESPN analyst Jay Bilas says. "Having the injury last year set him back, but he's had a terrific career."

A few more terrific weeks would be a great capper to that career.




A.J. Abrams **Texas**

Everything about Abrams' game is smooth—his quick release from beyond the 3-point arc, his pull-up midrange jumper and the way he glides into the lane on his way to the basket.

Smooth and effective. Now a junior, Abrams is no longer just a spot-up 3-point specialist. His game has become much more complete, and he has learned to use his quickness as a defender. His ability to complement star point guard D.J. Augustin as a shooter and penetrator—Abrams averages 16.2 points—helps Texas compensate for the lack of a go-to threat in the low post.

Abrams still can shoot the deep ball—he easily leads the Big 12 in 3-pointers made (89) this season—but it's his newfound versatility that gives the Longhorns a chance to advance deep into the tournament.


FROM LEFT: MATT HENFEL / UT ATHLETICS; BOB LEVERONE / SNC; MARY ANN CHASTAIN / AP

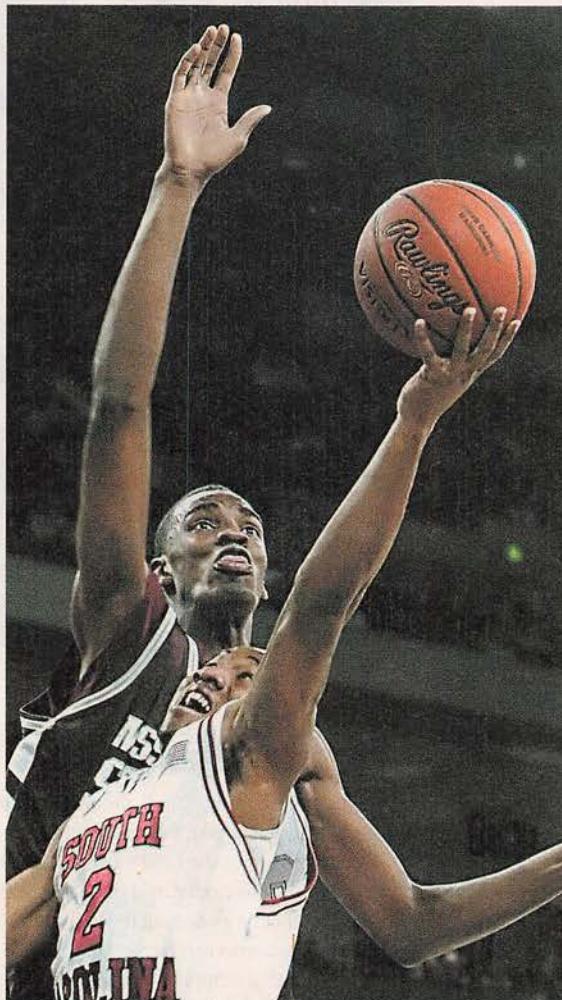


DeMarcus Nelson Duke

There was a time when seniors ruled at Duke. Players didn't leave early for the NBA, and the Blue Devils dominated college basketball with a roster that was chock full of experience.

That's not so much the case anymore. This year's edition has just one senior, Nelson, but he has all the determination and savvy of Blue Devils past. Nelson's averages have improved every season in points, assists and steals, and he's shooting a career-high 50.6 percent from the field, which is as much about smarter shot selection as anything.

Nelson is nearing the end of a road that was destined to take him to Durham. He committed to the Blue Devils a week before the end of his sophomore season in high school. His coach's name then? Duke Brown.



Jarvis Varnado Mississippi State

Varnado's meet-the-nation game was back on January 15, when Mississippi State won a nationally televised showdown against Kentucky. A little-known sophomore, he was everywhere—scoring, rebounding and swatting shots like he was an eighth-grader playing in a YMCA league for 6- and 7-year-olds. Varnado put up a triple double that night: 10 points, 12 rebounds and 10 blocked shots—his third 10-block effort of the season.

Varnado stands 6-9, which isn't all that uncommon, but his 7-4 wingspan is a unique weapon for the Bulldogs and a big reason opponents are shooting just 36.9 percent from the field. Varnado leads the nation with 4.8 blocks per game, and in six games this season he has had more blocked shots than points.

With Jamont Gordon and Charles Rhodes leading four players who average more than 10 points, that's just fine with the Bulldogs.

Ready to boogie

The Dance cards won't be filled out until this weekend, but why wait?

A sneak preview of who's looking good—and who might be a tourney wallflower. By Mike DeCourcy

Teams that can win the NCAA Tournament

(but most people think they can't):

1. Connecticut

The Huskies' lack of interior depth is worrisome, but UConn is among the nation's most athletic teams. Dynamic small forward Stanley Robinson has grown confident in his jump shot and is difficult for wings to defend. The one thing the team lacks is tournament experience.

2. Louisville

Rick Pitino's will—and the return of rock-solid center David Padgett—transformed the Cardinals from a fractious, self-involved bunch into a genuine team. More consistency at point guard would help.

3. Xavier

The Musketeers—with point guard Drew Lavender directing traffic—run their offense beautifully. They probably are a bit too dependent on execution to win six tournament games, but they showed signs of being able to freelance when the offense breaks down in February.

Teams that can't win it

(but everybody thinks they can):

1. Tennessee

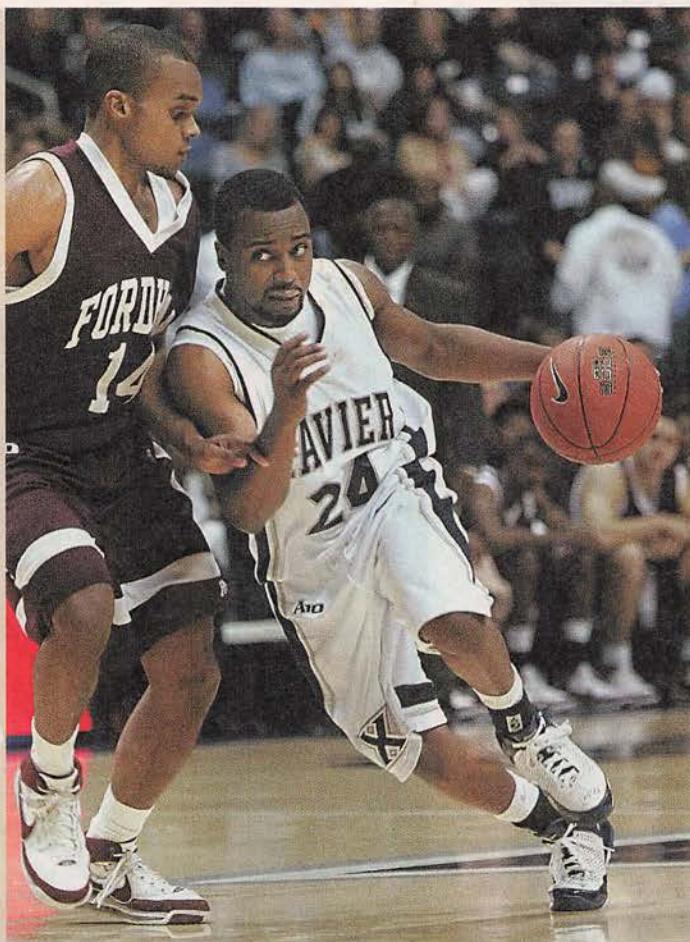
This is a terrific team that could reach San Antonio. But a team that can score inside is going to beat the Vols somewhere.

2. Duke

Winning six times without some degree of inside power will be difficult.

3. Georgetown

The Hoyas find themselves in too many tight games. Yes, they've been resilient, but being down on their luck only once will be telling in the NCAAs.



Lavender's leadership makes Xavier a threat.

The name game

Coaches often say, "It's all about the name on the front of the jersey." And many take this to extremes.

Beginning with the 1989 tournament, no team has won an NCAA championship without displaying its players' names across their backs. Let that be a warning to Washington State, Indiana and Arizona State, among others.

This idea that stripping the player of his identity somehow fosters greater teamwork? It's bunk. All it does is make it harder to watch the games on TV.

Bob Knight coached no-name teams to national titles in 1976, 1981 and 1987. Kansas was the last team to win using that style, in 1988.



The numbers

60 Seconds of rest per game Texas point guard D.J. Augustin got in Big 12 play.

.697 Combined free throw percentage of the past five NCAA champions.

15 Combined NCAA Tournament games won by Dean Smith, Bob Knight, Adolph Rupp and Jim Phelan after each reached 800 career victories.

6 Lowest any of the past four NCAA champions has ranked in statistician Ken Pomeroy's adjusted offensive efficiency ratings. This year's top six: Kansas, UCLA, Memphis, Wisconsin, Duke, North Carolina.

419 Career 3-pointers for Tennessee's Chris Lofton at the close of the regular season. Duke's J.J. Redick is the NCAA's all-time leader with 457.

Some advice

Things to keep in mind when picking winners on your bracket:

Don't fall for 'hot' teams

Last year's Sweet 16 included two teams that went 5-5 in their final 10 pre-tourney games (USC, Vanderbilt), two that went 6-4 (Pitt, Butler) and six that were 7-3—including national champion Florida, which endured two embarrassing losses down the stretch.

Order at McDonald's

Since 1979, every national champion except Maryland in 2002 has had a McDonald's All American on its roster. This is good news for Xavier (Drew Lavender) and Wisconsin (Brian Butch)—but isn't for Tennessee, Connecticut, Purdue or Vanderbilt.

1 is the loneliest number

The past eight teams to enter the NCAA Tournament with a No. 1 seed and a single regular-season loss did well. Four made the Final Four, and all but Stanford in 2004 reached the Sweet 16. But not one was able to win the title.

Double trouble

Fourteen teams have earned at-large bids with 13 or more losses. Don't immediately dismiss such teams. Seven have advanced, including two that reached the Final Four (North Carolina and Wisconsin in 2000) and another that made the Elite Eight. There's always hope.

How 'bout those Badgers? Butch is lovin' it!

Growing hopes

The sudden improvement of these players makes their teams increasingly dangerous:

1. Robin Lopez, PF, Stanford

Coach Trent Johnson has gone back and forth on starting Robin alongside his brother Brook. But in the first 10 games after the twins became a more regular tandem, Robin averaged 10.7 points and 5.6 rebounds and the Cardinal went 9-1.

2. Dwayne Collins, PF, Miami

Collins has excelled since slapping Duke with 26 points in the Hurricanes' season-making victory. He shot 60.0 percent in the next three games.

3. Charles Rhodes, PF, Mississippi State

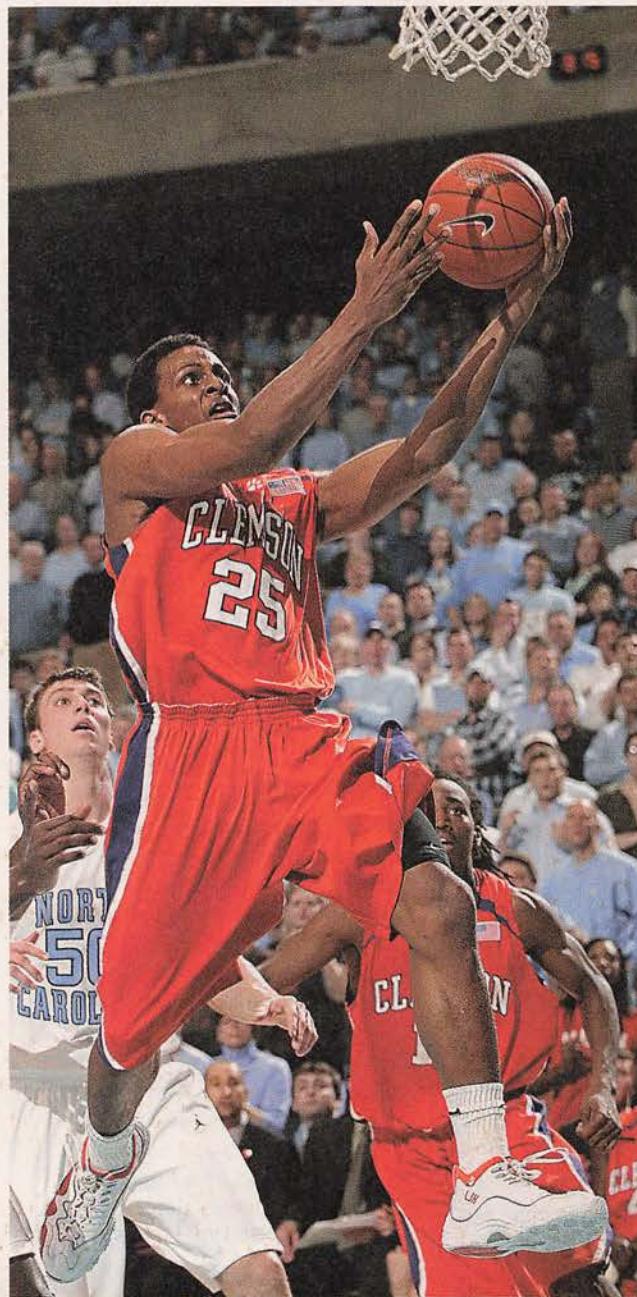
Jamont Gordon is the star. Shot-blocking Jarvis Varnado is the show. But Rhodes has grown into an offensive terror since Valentine's Day, averaging 22.1 points on 57.1 percent shooting.

In or out?

Team	RPI	Likely seed	Record
North Carolina	2	1	29-2
Duke	4	2	26-4
Clemson	22	6	22-8
Miami	27	8	21-9
Virginia Tech	57	—	18-12
Florida State	62	—	18-13
Maryland	64	—	18-12
Wake Forest	87	—	17-12

ACC

Clemson's foundation is built to last



Hammonds has good reason to call himself a utility guard—he has plenty of tools in his arsenal.

"I'm going to Disney World!" is a celebration unique to American sports. When Clemson makes the NCAA Tournament, guard Cliff Hammonds might give it a slight tweak: "I'm going to build Disney World!" He became passionate about architecture as a 10-year-old, when he learned his grandfather helped build the most magical place on earth. He thought to himself then and still does now: *That would be a cool job.*

And he will eventually get that job, or one just like it, perhaps after having an even cooler one: professional basketball player. For now, he's content building a legend at Clemson—he has led the team to the brink of its first tourney bid since 1998. The team leader as much because of his skills as his hard work, he has averaged double figures in scoring all four years while also regularly defending the opponent's best player. Now he faces the challenge of playing with a broken wrist on his nonshooting hand, an injury that occurred March 2 against Maryland.

Hammonds plays point guard and shooting guard and prefers to think of himself as neither, instead calling his position "utility guard." When he was in high school, his game was described as a mix between Jason Kidd's and Ray Allen's because he was an on-court leader and a distributor who could shoot. The best guards, he says, do a little bit of everything and all of it well.

Sounds like the rest of his life. As impressive as he is on the court, he is more impressive off of it. Already married and the father of a 14-month-old son, he also dominates in the classroom. He expects to graduate in May with a degree in architecture, one of the most challenging and competitive majors at Clemson. And, of course, he gets good grades.

He is impossibly mature. Asked whether it's hard to be in school, play basketball and maintain a long-distance relationship with his wife and son—they live in his hometown of Cairo, Ga., where she's finishing her degree at nearby Thomas University—he admits it is but says it's even harder on them.

The secret to his success is time management and prioritizing his tasks ("my family comes first"), skills he picked up from his father, who was in the military. "He gave us that discipline," Hammonds says. "We had to get our work done before we could play." —Matt Crossman

Mike DeCourcy's RIM SHOTS

Championship contender
North Carolina

Final Four dreams
Duke

Ready to be discovered
Trevor Booker,
F, Clemson

Happy just to get there
Miami

Begging to be upset
Clemson



Mike
DeCourcy's
**RIM
SHOTS**

**Championship
contenders**

Georgetown
Louisville

Fatal flaw

Georgetown's
low-octane offense

Best chemistry
Marquette

Dark-horse potential
Connecticut

**Ready to be
discovered**

Joe Alexander,
F, West Virginia

BIG EAST

In or out?

Putting a little fight in the Irish

Team	RPI	Likely seed	Record
Georgetown	7	2	25-4
Louisville	11	3	24-7
Connecticut	14	4	24-7
Notre Dame	19	4	24-6
Marquette	23	5	22-8
Pittsburgh	26	8	22-9
West Virginia	39	7	22-9
Syracuse	45	12	19-12
Villanova	56	—	19-11

If this were football, you can bet Luke Harangody would be one of the favorites to win the Heisman Trophy. As it is, the sophomore power forward from fish-out-of-water Notre Dame—whose basketball standouts don't carry high profiles on their own campus, let alone within the Big East—has rather quietly dominated at a Hansbroughian level for an Irish team with a shot at 25-plus wins by NCAA Tournament time.

Harangody is 6-8—6-11 with the muskrat on his head—and 250 pounds of barrel-chested, big-hipped bump-and-grind. Not to sell his talent short; his 23.3 points and 11.3 rebounds a game in Big East play have locked down any and all league player of the year awards. But his palpable effort and toughness in the lane are what most decisively enable the Irish to run and gun without being soft, a rare blend at all levels of basketball.

"He has an engine that never stops running," says Connecticut coach Jim Calhoun.

When Harangody was a fast-growing kid in Schererville, Ind., his parents forbade him and his older brother, Ty, from playing one-on-one without adult supervision. The games too often turned bloody.

With the Irish, Harangody—who lost 10 pounds and gained some good dietary habits last offseason—has steadily blended improving footwork, ballhandling skills and movement off the ball with his hell-bent style. In a December win against Kansas State in New York, he craftily hung with Michael Beasley for 19 points and 14 boards to Beasley's 19 and 13.

"I can just go longer stretches now," he says. "And play harder, too."

Gee. You think that might help a guy in late March? —Steve Greenberg

BIG TEN

Burn, babies, burn: A new Purdue has caught fire

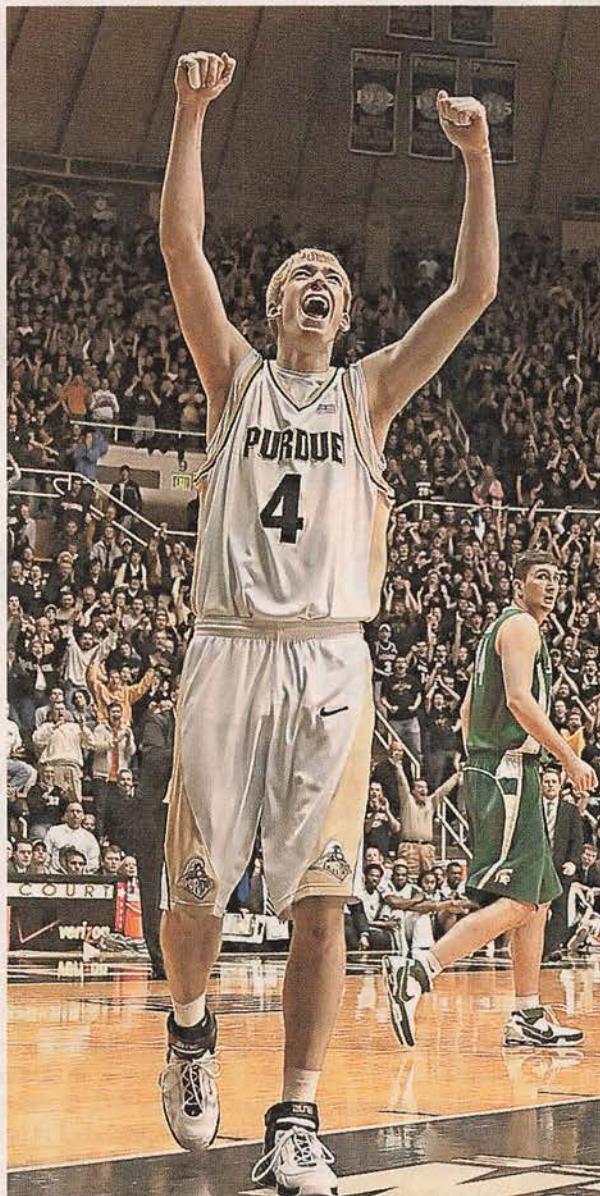
Robbie Hummel is the best freshman you've never heard of—the star of a resurgent Purdue team that is poised to introduce itself to America with a deep run in the NCAA Tournament.

He's also a slob. "Yeah, I'm pretty bad," says Hummel, who shares a dorm suite with fellow freshman hoopsters E'Twaun Moore, Scott Martin and JaJuan Johnson. "E'Twaun is pretty messy, but I'm the worst. I leave my clothes everywhere."

And then there was the time Martin found Hummel resting his bare feet on Martin's bed. "That freaked him out," says Hummel. "He's a germ freak."

It's all so disgustingly perfect, this story of a down-trodden program being polished to a championship hue by a quartet of native sons dubbed the Baby Boilermakers.

And Hummel, a scrawny 6-8 "point forward" who shares a hometown (Valparaiso, Ind.) with popcorn king and Purdue alum Orville Redenbacher, is the most phenomenal of the phenoms. In fact, some think he is the Boilermakers' best freshman—ever. "He's a really impressive kid," says Michigan State coach Tom Izzo. "He gets



Hummel has been called calm, but even a laid-back guy has to show a little joy every once and a while.

better every day. He's got a great demeanor. He's calm."

Purdue had fallen into disarray this decade, advancing to just two NCAA tourneys the past seven seasons as the program transitioned from Gene Keady to Matt Painter. Painter hit the recruiting road peddling hopes and dreams. Hummel and his freshman cohorts bought in, forming a recruiting class ranked sixth in the nation by Rivals.com. Many

expected immediate dividends—but no one expected Purdue to be this good this fast.

After being forecast by most to be a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten team, the Boilermakers finished second and will make consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances for the first time since the 1999 and 2000 seasons.

Purdue and Hummel arrived in February. He scored 21 points in a victory at No. 8 Wisconsin, Purdue's first road triumph over a ranked team since 1998, and a career-high 24 as the Boilermakers topped No. 10 Michigan State.

"He's just a good all-around basketball player," says Painter. "He can pass the basketball with his size; he can break you down off the dribble with size. He can guard bigs; he can guard guards. He just gives you that versatility, and he's a fun guy to coach."

—Tom Dienhart

Mike DeCourcy's RIM SHOTS

Final Four dreams

Wisconsin
Indiana

His draft stock will soar

Eric Gordon,
G, Indiana

Fatal flaw

Wisconsin's
discomfort against
athletic defenders

Team no one wants to play

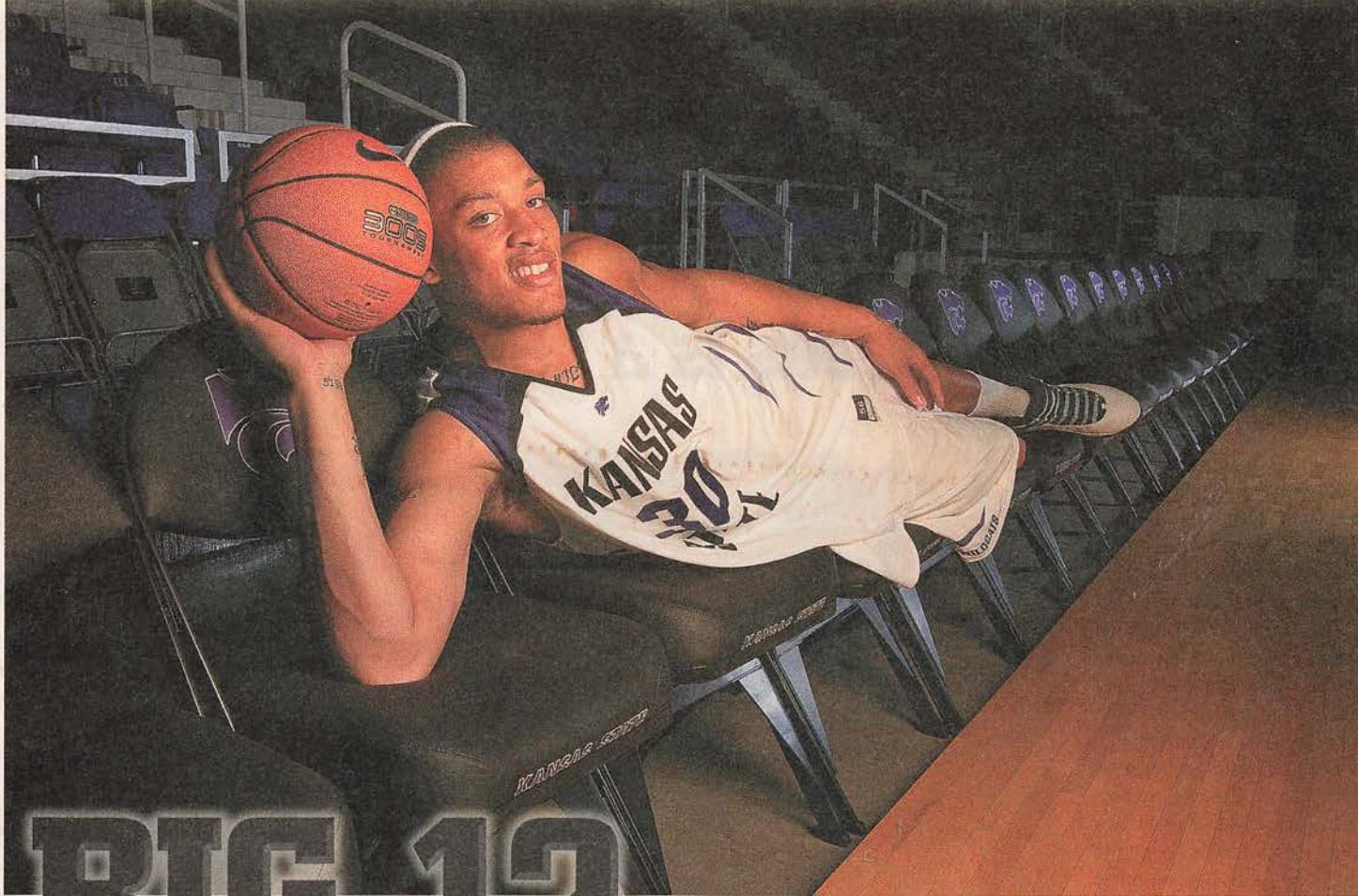
Purdue

Begging to be upset

Indiana

In or out?

Team	RPI	Likely seed	Record
Wisconsin	13	3	26-4
Michigan State	15	5	24-7
Indiana	17	4	25-6
Purdue	37	4	24-7
Ohio State	48	13	19-12



BIG 12

A great player doesn't always lead to a great run

Quantifying Michael Beasley's performance is simple enough.

Throw any number out there and the figures will tell you Beasley is having arguably the greatest freshman season in the history of college basketball. Look at his 26 double doubles, his 13 30-point games, his averages of 26.5 points and 12.5 rebounds. He has won the Big 12 rookie of the week award six consecutive times—eight times overall—and is a contender for the national player of the year award. The list goes on and on.

Numbers, though, don't paint the complete picture. "He's got a great presence," ESPN analyst Jay Bilas says. "He's just a man among men. Not just a man among boys. He takes up more space than somebody of his size should take up. He's the real thing."

The natural comparison to Beas-

ley, in terms of freshman impact, is Texas' Kevin Durant. Even with Durant last season, Texas couldn't get past the second round—a disappointment Beasley and the Wildcats would like to avoid. USC hassled and hurried Durant and dared the other Longhorns to beat them. Didn't happen. Durant had 30 points, but the rest of the squad hit just 13 of 40 shots as Texas was blown out by the Trojans.

K-State's success rests as much on Beasley's teammates as it does on the star freshman. "They have to be involved and aggressive and make sure they are not letting him do everything," Bilas says. "They've got to look to score, look to cut. They can't just stand and be spectators for a great show, which Beasley is."

A great show is made even better by multiple encores, which is exactly what Wildcats fans are hoping for.

—Ryan Fagan

Beasley can't afford to take it easy in the NCAAs. Opponents will be gunning for him.

Mike DeCourcy's
RIM SHOTS

Championship
contender
Kansas

Final Four dreams
Texas

His draft stock
will soar
D.J. Augustin,
G, Texas

Team no one
wants to play
Kansas State

Ready to be
discovered
Curtis Jerrells,
G, Baylor

In or out?

Team	RPI	Likely seed	Record
Texas	5	2	26-5
Kansas	8	2	28-3
Oklahoma	24	7	21-10
Baylor	35	8	21-9
Kansas State	44	10	20-10
Texas A&M	46	10	22-9
Texas Tech	61	—	16-14
Oklahoma State	84	—	16-14
Nebraska	99	—	18-11

PAC-10

All this story needs is a storybook ending

There is pure magic in the NCAA Tournament's knack for making sudden stars of everyday players. The best part: It is nearly impossible to see them coming, fun as it is to try.

Let's throw one name out there anyway: Taylor Rochestie.

The Washington State junior point guard has two huge factors working in his favor: a trusty 3-point stroke (he shoots 43.5 percent) and a pair of run-all-day teammates, Kyle Weaver and Derrick Low, who tend to draw opponents' best perimeter defenders. Rochestie is a fine passer and an outstanding free throw shooter, but in order for the Cougars—one of those teams no one wants to play in March—to make the run they believe they are destined for, Rochestie just might have to play Mr. Big Shot.

Rochestie also has a moving back story. He was lightly recruited but became a surprise starter as a freshman at Tulane and outperformed all expectations, scoring 10.9 points per game. Then Hurricane Katrina hit. Rochestie stayed with the program in its temporary home of College Station, Texas, but he blew out a knee two weeks before the start of the 2005-06 season. Without access to adequate rehabilitation treatment, Rochestie transferred to Wazzu—where he plans to play as a walk-on next season in order to open up another scholarship for the program that took him in.

"It shows how much of a leader and a great teammate Taylor is," says Cougars coach Tony Bennett.

It's also a story CBS will rally around if Wazzu makes some magic of its own in the tournament. All Rochestie will have to do is drop a bunch of long balls—maybe even a buzzer-beater—and he'll take his place as the most famous walk-on-in-waiting ever.

—Steve Greenberg



In or out?

Team	RPI	Likely seed	Record
UCLA	6	1	28-3
Stanford	16	3	24-6
Washington State	21	7	23-7
Arizona	29	11	18-13
USC	34	7	20-10
Oregon	52	13	18-12
Arizona State	74	12	19-11

Rochestie has done it all at colleges on opposite sides of the country. Adding a little March mastery to his resume would be a perfect touch.

Mike DeCourcy's RIM SHOTS

Championship contender
UCLA

Final Four dreams
Stanford
Washington State

Dark-horse potential
USC

His draft stock will soar
Jerryd Bayless,
G, Arizona

Best chemistry
Washington State



When Neltner gets tough,
the Commodores get going.

An unsettling year can still yield one shining moment

Wouldn't you know it. All those years of busting your tail, of becoming everything your coach preaches and nothing you could have imagined—and for what?

A senior season that defies logic, a career that—thankfully, mercifully—still has the final, frenetic chapter remaining.

"It has been a little unsettling," Ross Neltner says.

That's one way of explaining it. Here's another:

Neltner (6-9, 238) has gone from the dependable undersized post player Vanderbilt coach Kevin Stallings leans on to the guy Stallings can't figure out.

No one exemplifies Stallings' mantra of play hard, play smart and execute better than Neltner. Not dynamic guard Alex Gordon. Not even electric wing Shan Foster, who will be the most overlooked, undervalued player in the NCAA Tournament.

Yet here is Neltner, stumbling through a senior season with enough twists and turns to rid Stallings of the few hairs remaining on his shiny dome: a game-winning shot against Georgia; a nonfactor in a humiliating loss to Florida. Locking down Ken-

tucky star freshman Patrick Patterson; calling a timeout when the team had none in a crucial loss at Arkansas.

Neltner has been benched and won his job back. He was publicly criticized by Stallings—and he publicly challenged himself soon after. Stallings is riding him harder than he has at any time during Neltner's three years in Nashville, where he transferred after leaving SEC rival LSU.

"There's no message I'm trying to send," Stallings says. "I want him to play better."

Here's why: When Neltner plays well, Vandy is a dangerous team. *Final Four-dangerous.* The Commodores defend the perimeter and shoot the 3 as well as anyone in the country.

Every team has stars; not every team has players who know their roles—and embrace them. Vandy feeds off Neltner's desire to do the little things, the gutty, grinding things often overlooked.

"The tournament is like a new season," Neltner says.

One that can't follow the same erratic path of the previous four months. —Matt Hayes

In or out?

Team	RPI	Likely seed	Record
Tennessee	1	1	28-3
Vanderbilt	10	5	25-6
Mississippi St.	38	6	21-9
Mississippi	41	11	21-9
Arkansas	42	10	20-10
Kentucky	49	10	18-11
Florida	65	—	21-10

Records through end of regular season.

Mike
DeCourcy's
RIM SHOTS

Final Four dreams
Tennessee

Best chemistry
Vanderbilt

His draft stock will soar
Tyler Smith,
F, Tennessee

Begging to be upset
Mississippi State

Team no one wants to play
Kentucky

Small talk

They don't play in power conferences. You probably haven't seen them on TV. But if you want to win your bracket pool, you'll need to get to know these mid-majors. *By Ryan Fagan*

Drake

No player mirrors his team's rise better than Drake senior Adam Emmenecker.

There weren't many expectations for him or Drake heading into this season. The Bulldogs had a first-year coach in Keno Davis, were returning just one starter and had been picked to finish ninth in the Missouri Valley. Emmenecker's biggest success entering the season was off the court: He's a scholar by any definition of the word. As for his on-court achievements, well, check out the first line about his junior season in the Drake media guide: "Played in 23 games ..."

Uh, impressive. This season, Emmenecker led the Missouri Valley in assists and was named conference player of the year. Drake followed his lead, rolling to MVC regular-season and tournament titles and compiling a sparkling 28-4 record.

But it's not just Emmenecker. Josh Young built on his impressive freshman season by leading the Bulldogs with 16.1 points per game. Guard Leonard Houston is averaging 14.2 points, and forwards Jonathan Cox (11.5 points, 8.4 rebounds) and Klayton Korver (10.0 points) give Drake a supremely balanced attack.

And they make Drake a supremely dangerous matchup.



Kent State

The Golden Flashes are nothing if not consistent. This is their 10th consecutive season with at least 20 wins, and this year's squad, which achieved the first top 25 regular-season appearance in school history, is primed to repeat the Elite Eight run led by Trevor Huffman in 2002. Juco transfer Al Fisher—who had 28 points in Kent State's biggest win of the year, at St. Mary's—and senior forward Mike Scott are the top scoring threats.

Drake's Emmenecker (above) and South Alabama's Bennett did a little more than just play the games this season.



Davidson

This is one heck of a basketball team. Nobody doubts that. The question is: Just how good are the Wildcats? Nobody really knows. There are plenty of *yeah, but* factors to consider:

■ The team is 25-6 overall and demolished Southern Conference foes all season, racking up a 20-0 league mark with an average margin of victory approaching 16 points. *Yeah, but* Davidson is the only SoCon team in the RPI top 100, so how impressive is that?

■ The Wildcats played a brutal nonconference schedule and pushed North Carolina, UCLA and Duke to the limit. *Yeah, but* they didn't beat any of the powers, and losses to Charlotte, N.C. State and Western Michigan didn't help their case. They are 0-5 against top 100 teams and 25-1 against everyone else.

■ Sophomore guard Stephen Curry, one of the best pure shooters in the country, is averaging 25.2 points and 4.3 3-pointers. *Yeah, but* Curry and senior Jason Richards (12.9) are the only two Wildcats scoring more than 7.8 points per game, and depth can be key during the tournament. Can they still compete if Curry or Richards has an off night?

See? A lot of factors to consider. But here's the bottom line: They have confidence from hanging with the power teams and confidence from blitzing through their conference schedule. And confidence is a *huge* factor come tournament time.

South Alabama

The Sun Belt hasn't had two representatives in the Big Dance since 1994, when Western Kentucky and Louisiana-Lafayette both put their shiny shoes on.

If South Alabama gets upset in the conference tournament, though, the Jaguars have earned the right to be in the conversation—an RPI in the top 25, a victory against Mississippi State, so-close losses at Vanderbilt and Ole Miss and two wins against Western Kentucky. Senior guard Demetric Bennett is a two-time Sun Belt first-teamer who contributes 19.7 points and 5.9 rebounds, and forwards DeAndre Coleman and Brandon Davis take care of business on the glass.

Saint Mary's

Way back on November 10, two of the top mid-majors in the country squared off in the final of the Saint Mary's Tip-Off Classic. Of course, at the time nobody knew the host Gaels and visiting Drake were going to be so good.

For Saint Mary's, junior forward Diamon Simpson (13.5 points, 9.5 rebounds) was named the West Coast Conference defensive player of the year and Patrick Mills (14.4 points), a freshman guard from Canberra, Australia—one of four players on the team from Down Under—was the newcomer of the year. Both were WCC first-team all-conference picks, and both make the Gaels a threat to reach the Sweet 16.



A G.M. change during the season that mattered—who would've guessed?

A quick fix in Philly

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

Switching general managers in-season usually has about as much impact on a team as changing socks. So when Ed Stefanski replaced Billy King in Philadelphia in early December, I yawned. Bringing home a native son seemed like a fine idea, but unless Stefanski was planning to put his hair in cornrows, get all tattooed up and slip on an elbow sleeve, the glory days of the Allen Iverson era would not be rekindled anytime soon.

Well, bully for Broad Street. Better days have arrived in a hurry. The 76ers, seven games under .500 when Stefanski left the Nets to join his hometown team, started the week three games over .500 since the change. They had won eight straight at home, their longest such streak since 2002. A 7-3 record since the All-Star break put the Sixers in control of seventh place in the Eastern Conference standings. Certainly no one in Detroit or Boston is shaking in his sneakers—the Sixers still haven't reached .500 and would rank no better than 11th in the West. But considering they were pegged to finish lower than the Knicks, the Philadelphia story has become one of the biggest surprises of the new year.

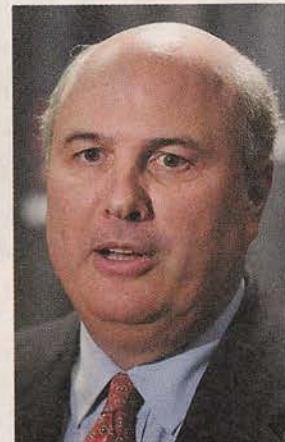
Three decisions by the new guy sparked the turnaround:

He traded Kyle Korver. After Stefanski determined Korver was not in the team's long-range plans, he gave the sharp-shooter and the remaining three-plus years on his contract to the Jazz in late December. The move was made to clear minutes for young players such as 19-year-old rookie Thaddeus Young. An athletic power forward, Young has averaged nearly 10 points and six rebounds since becoming a starter.

He turned up the tempo. Giving more minutes to young players such as Young, Louis Williams and Jason Smith went hand-in-hand with Stefanski's decision to push the pace. Besides running more on offense, the Sixers are employing a fullcourt press—often when the second unit is on the floor—and regularly mixing in halfcourt traps and zone defenses.

The team's scoring has improved every month since Stefanski came onboard, with the Sixers at their best since the All-Star break. They averaged 107.1 points in the first 10 games after the break, a 12.7-point improvement over the first half.

He didn't trade Andre Miller. Despite nonstop rumors that Miller was on the market, Stefanski held tight. Miller, in turn, has developed into the ideal leader for a young team. He has only one season—at nearly \$10 million—left on his contract and could be dealt this summer, but the Sixers don't



So far, Stefanski has made all the right moves.

Scouts Views: 76ers

PG Louis Williams.

The fact the 76ers kept Andre Miller shows me they didn't think Williams was ready to run the offense. He is not a point guard, but he's a good third guard off the bench.

PF Thaddeus Young.

He has impressed me since he got his opportunity to play more. He's athletic and active.

SF Andre Iguodala.

Not signing the (\$57 million) extension before the season bothered him early on. But give him credit for coming out of that. I'm still not sure he's a franchise-type player, but he's a strong No. 2 guy.

C Samuel Dalembert.

The uptempo, pressure style they're going with plays to his strengths. When they're pressing, it gives him more opportunities to block shots, and that's when he's at his best.

Miller blocked out trade rumors and became the 76ers' best player.

**SUN 3/16**

Hornets vs Pistons 3:30 PM ET

**WED 3/19**

Pistons vs Cavaliers 8:00 PM ET



Warriors vs Clippers 10:30 PM ET

SUN 3/23

Spurs vs Mavericks 1:00 PM ET



Pistons vs Wizards 8:00 PM ET



YOUR NBA DESTINATION

**WEDNESDAYS
AND FRIDAYS** 
SUNDAYS ALSO AVAILABLE ON  

worry about speculation bothering him.

"I think what happened is that when they saw how he kept showing up with his lunch pail and doing his job despite his name being in all that trade speculation, they were impressed," a Western Conference executive says. "I think they realized, 'This is a guy we should hang onto. He can show our young players how to win.'"

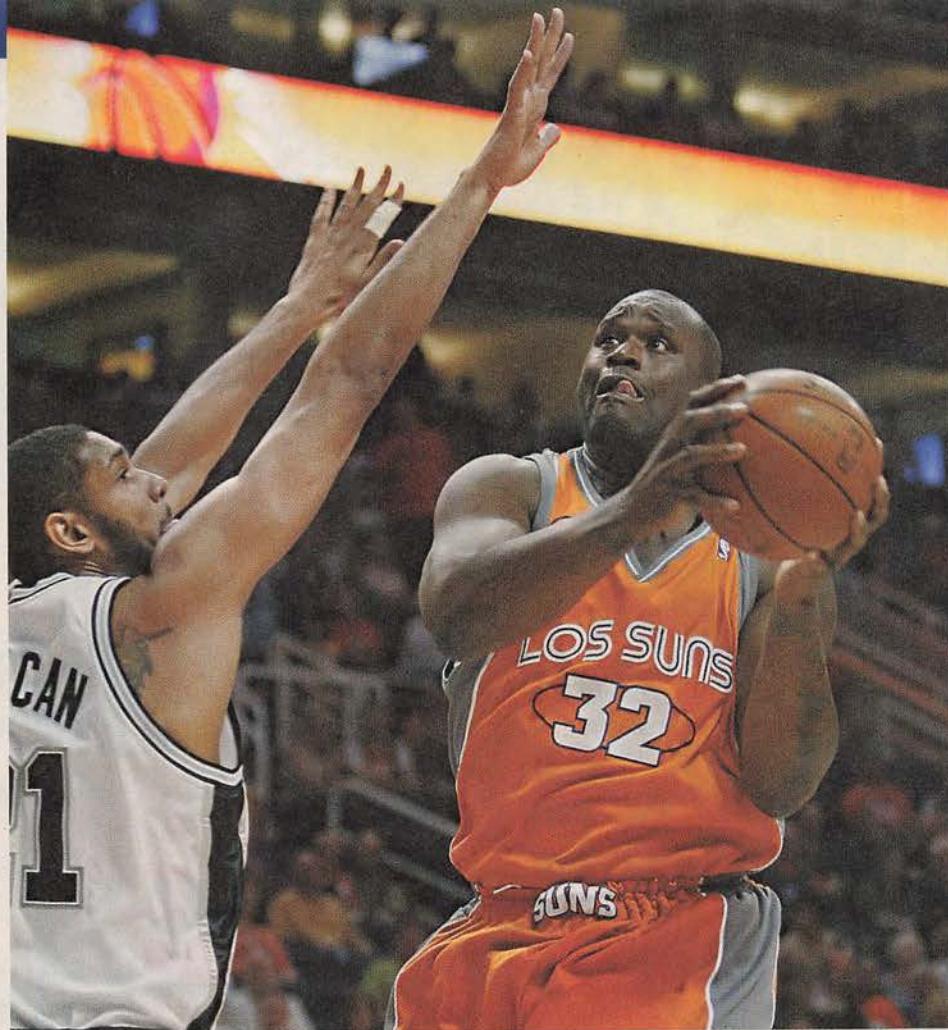
Miller long has been one of the game's underrated point guards, in part because of his herky-jerky game, ugly outside shot and stoic demeanor. "He's so quiet, you don't know what you have in him," the executive says.

The Sixers have learned he is their best player, with all due respect to the contributions of small forward Andre Iguodala. "His personality is a perfect fit for our team," coach Maurice Cheeks says. "If he needs to score, he'll score. If we need him to run the offense, he'll run the offense. He knows what needs to be done."

Miller is embracing his role as veteran mentor so much that he has begun talking more in the locker room. "He's always been a chirper on the court, but now he's sharing his NBA war stories with us," Iguodala says.

To hear that Miller has become a willing storyteller is a stunner—almost on the level of an in-season change of G.M.s making an immediate impact.

SN



Opponents are finding that it no longer takes a village to guard O'Neal.

An NBA scout on the latest **Chauncey Billups-Rajon Rondo** point guard matchup: "Rondo bothered him all night with his quickness. I know this isn't the playoffs, but Billups is walking the ball up the court too often, which means the Pistons don't get into their offense until 3 or 4 seconds later. Sometimes it's difficult to snap out of a habit like that. When the Pistons don't get a shot off of Billups' penetration, **Rasheed Wallace** or **Tayshaun Prince** sometimes will end up taking a hurried 3-pointer. Watch the difference when **Rodney Stuckey** is out there for Detroit. He is a little out of control, but he hustles them into their offense. The way Rondo looked against Billups is one reason why I like the Celtics over the Pistons right now." ➤ **Pat Riley**'s decision to leave the Miami bench for a few games in March has to do with his wanting to scout. Riley's absence will allow him to see how assistant **Erik Spoelstra** handles the opportunity to run the team. Spoelstra is considered the front-runner to succeed Riley. ➤

INSIDE DISH

Opponents are not regretting their decision to defend Suns C **Shaquille O'Neal** with one player. O'Neal attempted 10 shots only twice in his first nine games with the Suns and averaged 11.1 points. After O'Neal passes out of the post, the Suns have not been trying to get him the

ball again on the same possession. ➤ The Raptors will have a difficult decision this summer: They must choose whether to keep restricted free-agent PG **José Calderón** and continue to walk the fine line of balancing his playing time with that of **T.J. Ford**, who reportedly is becoming increasingly unhappy with his role off the bench. ➤ Reinstated Hornets PF **Chris Andersen** will push disappointing C **Hilton Armstrong** even farther toward the end of the bench. Andersen will provide the Hornets a bigger, more athletic version of SF **Ryan Bowen**. ➤ The Rockets' 18-game run was not the only impressive streak they brought into the week. Their streak of winning by at least 10 points was up to nine games.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

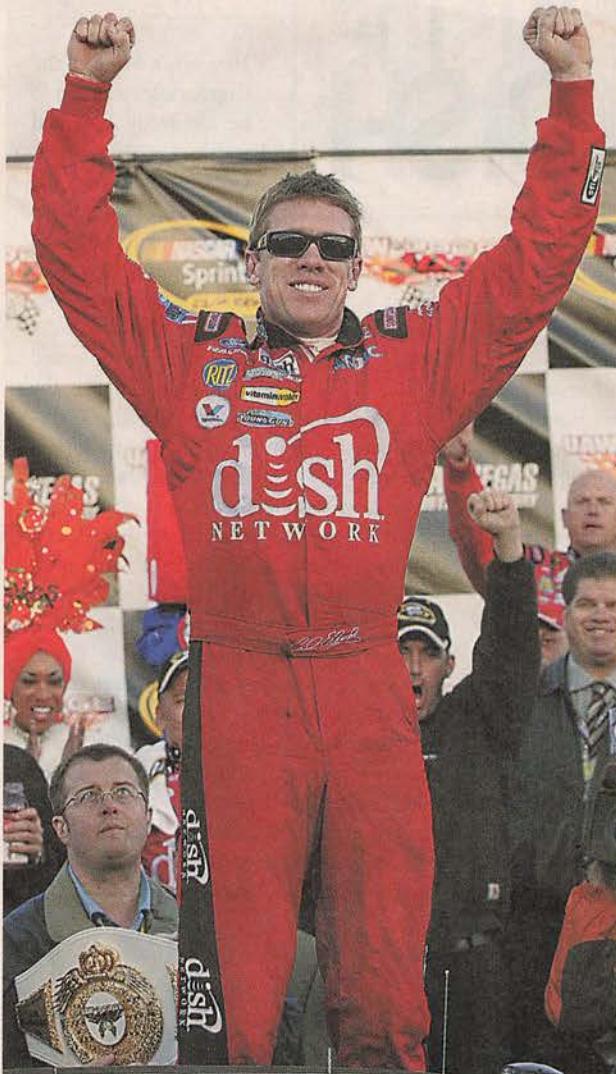
Looking forward to watching Spurs vs. Pistons in The Finals? Didn't think so, but don't rule out the possibility. Stan McNeal isn't. He will be at the Palace on Friday night to report on the possible Finals preview at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

I was assured by someone close to Yao Ming that if Yao doesn't think he's healthy enough to play in Beijing, he won't play. I want to believe him, but time will tell.

When a player misses as much of the season as Gilbert Arenas has, opting out of his contract would not seem wise. But if anyone can prosper in such a situation, Agent Zero is the guy.

When Stephon Marbury says he wants to return to the Knicks next season, maybe he isn't being irrational. More likely, he's realizing how difficult he will be to trade with a contract reportedly worth almost \$22 million in its final season.



HAROLD HINSON FOR SNN

Edwards doesn't always get along with his fellow drivers, but the man knows how to celebrate a victory.

Yeah, the penalties after Vegas hurt, but Carl Edwards' two early wins indicate Roush Fenway Racing has regained its giddyup.

Back in the driver's seat?

By Bob Pockrass

With all the talk about the dominance of Hendrick Motorsports and Toyota's expected surge, it seems everyone is forgetting that Roush Racing—now Roush Fenway Racing—dominated the sport just three years ago.

In 2005, the second year of NASCAR's Chase format, Roush put all five of its drivers in NASCAR's version of the playoffs. But in the two years since, Roush drivers have won only 13 times and only four have qualified for the Chase.

Now, after four 2008 races, Roush is back near the top—thanks to the energetic, successful and sometimes controversial Carl Edwards, who won back-to-back events at tracks in California and Las Vegas.

But that success didn't come without a problem. A pretty big problem. Edwards' car had no issues at California but didn't pass NASCAR's postrace inspection at Vegas. The lid that covers an oil reservoir

was not in place.

NASCAR docked Edwards 100 points, suspended crew chief Bob Osborne for six weeks and left open the door for an additional penalty.

NASCAR then made an unprecedented move when it ruled that Edwards, should he qualify for the Chase, will not get the 10 bonus points for his Las Vegas win when drivers are "seeded" following the regular season. The 12 Chase qualifiers' point totals are automatically revised to 5,000, with a 10-point bonus awarded to drivers for every win during pre-Chase events.

That penalty will make teams check every inch of their cars thoroughly and discourage sneaky tactics to gain an edge. Before, a penalty that didn't occur during the Chase had no bearing on the Chase.

So NASCAR put the hammer down on Roush.

Whenever this type of cheating/part malfunction happens, the stories are predictable. The team typically indicates that

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something merely broke and there wasn't much of an advantage. Then NASCAR replies that intent doesn't matter and says if there wasn't an advantage or a safety issue, the problem wouldn't be covered in the rulebook. And then the other teams pipe in by saying no way could it have been an accident and, yes, there was an edge.

This case seems to be following that path, and NASCAR is doing the right thing.

So is Roush truly back ahead of the curve? Well, it's hard to tell after a handful of races, but indications are that it is. And it's not just because of Edwards' wins or a mysterious tank lid.

Greg Biffle is a happy camper—and he will let you know when he's not. Matt Kenseth, whose former crew chief, Robbie Reiser, is getting much of the credit for the surge as Roush general manager, still is solid with new chief Chip Bolin. David Ragan has shown promise in his second year. And even though Jamie McMurray is a work in progress, he did win the summer race at Daytona last year.

So what's next? First, Roush must suck up the penalty and deal with it. Although NASCAR's appeals committee has been a little more lenient this year than in the past, it's hard to imagine Roush Fenway winning any sort of concession.

The lid was missing, and even if there was no intent, it can't be proved that it did not provide an advantage. Even a lenient appeals committee isn't going to give on that one. Did Edwards win because of the violation? Can't say. But it also is impossible to say he would have won without the violation.

This wasn't a good episode for Roush Fenway Racing. But it looks as if there could be good days to come for the team that won back-to-back titles in 2003 and 2004.

SN

Bob Pockrass is an associate editor for *NASCAR Scene*. Read more from Pockrass at scenedaily.com.

speedreads

Good for Red Bull Racing, which temporarily replaced AJ Allmendinger with Mike Skinner in the No. 84 Camry. Skinner is a terrific qualifier in trucks, and his fifth-place qualifying effort in his Cup season debut at Las Vegas affirms his ability to make races.

Roush Fenway Racing's denial of wrongdoing regarding the oil tank cover on Carl Edwards' car is hard to believe, considering five Nationwide teams were penalized for a similar infraction at Daytona.

We've already seen drivers, like Greg Biffle at Las Vegas, get incredibly loose but still save themselves from wrecking. These winged cars seem to have improved stability. —Roger Kuznia

It was just a matter of time before two things would happen in the Sprint Cup Series: Toyota winning and **Kyle Busch** winning. Both happened together last Sunday at

Atlanta Motor Speedway. Busch has been successful in every car or truck he has stepped into this season, and that didn't change last weekend. In addition to winning the Cup race, he won the Craftsman Truck Series race. And he most likely would have won the Nationwide race after leading 153 of the first 170 laps, but a blown tire ended that possibility. If not for that mishap, Busch would have become the first driver to win all three races in one weekend and the first to lead all three series at the same time. Busch still leads the Sprint Cup and Truck series; he ranks third in the Nationwide standings. >

Tony Stewart, a longtime critic of Goodyear, got in his shots at Atlanta two days before he ripped the tiremaker on national TV after finishing second in the Cup race. "We've got such a bad right-side tire, compared to what we tested here (in October)," Stewart said last Friday. "There isn't anybody, I don't think, who is happy with the tires we've got. After

INSIDE DISH

10 years of being in the Cup Series, you learn to be highly disappointed with everything that Goodyear does." The new Cup cars have heavier loads on the

right side than in previous years. "I hate to say it, but the best thing that Goodyear does is make that gold trophy at the end of the year," said Stewart, in reference to the award given to the series champion. "That is the one thing that they always do right. Everything from that moment on until the end of the year—it's a crapshoot." > **Dale Jarrett** feels a kinship with Packers quarterback **Brett Favre**, who retired last week. Jarrett will run his last points race Sunday at Bristol before saying his final goodbye to the Sprint Cup Series after the All-Star Challenge nonpoints event May 17 at Lowe's Motor Speedway. Jarrett: "When Brett talked about, you know you can still do it but he's just tired, I understand that exactly. It may be hard to express to people who say, 'Well, you don't know how lucky you are to get to do what you do.' Well, I do know that, but I also know that there's a time for all of it to come to an end. This is my time."



For Kyle Busch and Toyota officials, the Atlanta win satisfied a big sweet tooth.

A crash course in safety

Jeff Gordon's wreck at Las Vegas raises new questions about 'soft walls' at Sprint Cup tracks *By Reid Spencer*



Gordon's hard hit at Vegas may push NASCAR to put soft walls on inside walls at all tracks.

It was a brutal, vicious impact—comparable in magnitude to hits Jeff Gordon had suffered during crashes at Texas Motor Speedway in 1999 and Pocono in 2006.

When Gordon's No. 24 Chevrolet slid up into Matt Kenseth's No. 17 Ford off Turn 2 two weeks ago at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, both cars spun wildly.

The nose of Gordon's Chevy caught an opening on the inside wall of the backstretch, ripping the radiator from the car. Unlike the outside walls in the corners, where most crashes in NASCAR racing occur, the inside wall is concrete—and not protected by SAFER (Steel and Foam Energy Reduction) barriers, or "soft walls" in use at the more common trouble spots on Sprint Cup racetracks.

Third-place finisher Greg Biffle had a front-row seat for the crash and deftly avoided the spinning cars. After the race—and again during testing at Phoenix International Raceway last week—Biffle urged speedway owners to place SAFER barriers on inside and outside walls at every racetrack on the circuit.

He also recommended staggering the inside walls on either side of openings to make them less hazardous.

"People get hurt in this sport not from normal accidents," Biffle said. "People get hurt from freak accidents. It's something that shouldn't have happened. What if Jeff Gordon would have hit that wall with the left side of his car, the driver's side, instead of head-on? It might be a different story."

The response from Las Vegas Motor Speedway was immediate. Track spokesperson Jeff Motley said the speedway would follow any and all recommendations from NASCAR to improve safety at the 1.5-mile facility.

As for SAFER barriers encircling every speedway on the outside and inside walls, that always has been part of NASCAR's long-term plan.

"It wasn't all that long ago that we didn't have any SAFER barriers," Sprint Cup Series director John Darby says. "So the approach to it is: OK, let's go to every racetrack, send our team of experts out there. You tell me how many times a car has hit a wall right here, and then over here and then over here and over here."

"So the part of the wall that's been hit 500 times in the last 10 years—that was the first place the barrier went, and then we're slowly migrating to more and more barriers as we can get there." **SN**



Mobil 1 and Sam Hornish Jr.
Let the countdown begin.

The 2008 Sprint Cup Series season will be the first for Sam Hornish Jr. in the new #77 Mobil 1 Dodge. In the meantime, here are a few facts and figures to help get you ready for all of the excitement:

400

Maximum temperature at which Mobil 1 continues to provide maximum engine protection

50+

Percent of NASCAR drivers using Mobil 1

19

Number of IndyCar wins by Sam Hornish Jr. in his eight seasons

6

Number of years Mobil 1 has been the Official Motor Oil of NASCAR

3

Number of IndyCar Championships won by Sam Hornish Jr.

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The Avalanche, who bolstered their depth by adding Forsberg at the deadline, are in. But that means someone else is out.

With three weeks remaining in the regular season, playoff wannabes are positioning themselves for a late run. Who will break through?

Breaking down the bubble

By Chuck Gormley

Before the 2004-05 lockout, no team that recorded 90 or more points had been denied a ticket to the postseason.

But in the two years since the institution of the shootout, six teams have topped the 90-point mark only to finish below the elite eight in their conferences. This season, with three weeks remaining, promises more of the same.

If point production continues at its current pace, 93 should be enough to get off the bubble and into the playoffs—in both conferences. But for

any team with 92, that bubble could burst.

"I remember when a lot of teams used to get in with 80 points," Flyers goaltender Martin Biron says. "You just had to be over .500 to get in."

Eastern Conference

Barring a late collapse, the Penguins, Canadiens, Devils and Senators are locks for four of the top five seeds. The Southeast winner, which is shaping up as a battle between the Hurricanes and Capitals, might be the only team from that division to get in.



The Lightning are the only East team out of the playoff picture, but the prospects also look grim for the Islanders, Maple Leafs, Thrashers and Panthers. That leaves six teams on the playoff bubble:

Hurricanes. When high-scoring forwards Rod Brind'Amour and Justin Williams suffered season-ending injuries, general manager Jim Rutherford dealt popular veterans Cory Stillman and Mike Commodore to the Senators for right winger Patrick Eaves and defenseman Joe Corvo—and the Canes took off. Waiver wire pickup Sergei Samsonov would need to continue his near point-a-game pace and goalie Cam Ward would have to hold steady for Carolina to break out in the Southeast. **Prediction: In.**

Capitals. No team gave up less to get more at the trading deadline than the Caps, who picked up goalie Cristobal Huet, center Sergei Fedorov and left winger Matt Cooke for fourth-line left winger Matt Pettinger, defenseman Ted Ruth and a 2008 second-round pick. The addition of Fedorov will help Alexander Ovechkin, who is poised to become the first 60-goal scorer since 1995-96. **Prediction: Out.**

Bruins. Boston was one of four teams to stand pat at the deadline, which means center Phil Kessel and defenseman Mark Stuart were worth more to the Bruins than they were to teams in pursuit of them. The Bruins aren't loaded with star power, but they are balanced enough to get into the playoffs for the first time in four years. **Prediction: In.**

Rangers. After months of inconsistency, the Rangers are on a roll now that left winger Brendan Shanahan is healthy and rookie forwards Brandon

Dubinsky and Nigel Dawes are getting big minutes. As long as goaltender Henrik Lundqvist stays sharp, the Rangers should earn their third straight postseason appearance. **Prediction: In.**

Flyers. With right winger Joffrey Lupul and defenseman Derian Hatcher back in the lineup and captain-in-waiting Mike Richards expected back soon, the Flyers should have enough depth to return to the playoffs after finishing with the league's worst record last season. **Prediction: In.**

Sabres. By stripping themselves of All-Star defenseman Brian Campbell, the Sabres sent a clear message they are rebuilding. That mindset will be hard to overcome as they push for the eighth seed. **Prediction: Out.**

Western Conference

Six teams—the Red Wings, Stars, Wild, Ducks, Sharks and Flames—have virtually assured themselves postseason passes. The Flames should give the Wild a strong run for the Northwest title and the third seed.

Barring a miraculous run by the Blues, Oilers, Blackhawks or Blue Jackets, the battle for the final two playoff spots should boil down to the Canucks, Avalanche, Predators and Coyotes.

Canucks. Vancouver G.M. Dave Nonis resisted the urge to gut his team for Brad Richards and instead held on to gritty forward Ryan Kesler. The Canucks will rely on defense and strong goaltending by Roberto Luongo to get in, but they don't have the depth to compete with Detroit or Dallas. **Prediction: In.**

Avalanche. The Avs reached into their past by adding center Peter Forsberg and defenseman Adam Foote, along with defenseman Ruslan Salei. Losing right winger Marek Svatos (knee) for the rest of the season hurts, and the team needs Ryan Smyth to return after being out with a concussion. But the Avs are deep enough to make the cut. **Prediction: In.**

Predators. Nashville picked up forwards Brandon Bochenski and Jan Hlavac and is within striking distance of the Canucks and Avs. But unless Chris Mason or Dan Ellis gets incredibly hot in goal, there's not enough talent for the Preds to crack the eighth spot. **Prediction: Out.**

Coyotes. Phoenix has made major strides under coach Wayne Gretzky and is headed in the right direction with rookie centers Peter Mueller and Martin Hanzal. But the Coyotes aren't as talented as the Avalanche or Canucks. **Prediction: Out.** SN



Bad deal or steal? Hossa was acquired at the expense of some serious talent.

INSIDE DISH

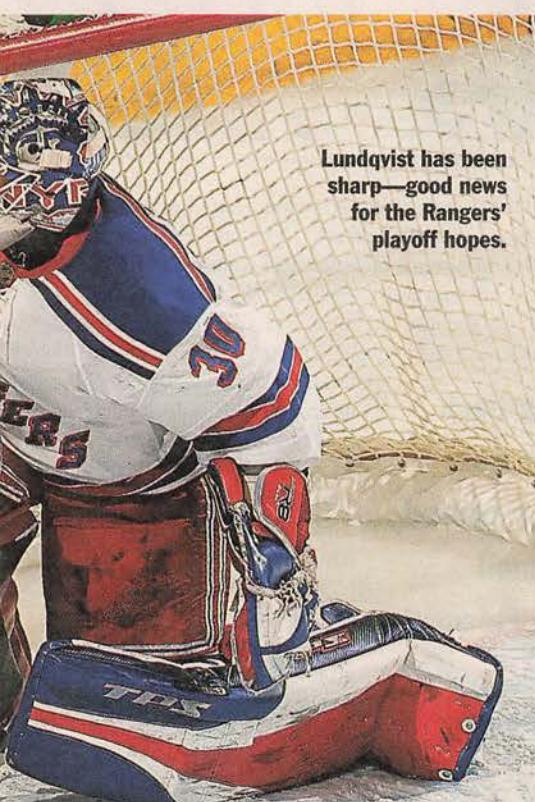
It was just like old times for Ducks coach Randy Carlyle and Senators coach Bryan Murray last week when the teams reprised their 2007 Stanley Cup finals matchup. Murray, Ottawa's general manager, was coaching

only his third game since firing John Padock and replacing him for the stretch run. Just like they did in April, the Ducks won, 3-1, handing the Senators their 11th loss in 16 games. > At least one scout believes the Penguins made a mistake when they gave up C Erik Christensen, RW Colby Armstrong and minor league C Angelo Esposito to Atlanta for high-scoring RW Marian Hossa and LW Pascal Dupuis. "I think it was a lot to give up" he says. "Christensen is a guy who can play in this league, and Armstrong brings great chemistry to a team. I don't know how high Pittsburgh was on Esposito; some scouts are ho-hum about him. From what I hear, nobody's in love with him. When you're finished paying (Sidney) Crosby, (Evgeni) Malkin, (Marc-Andre) Fleury and (Jordan) Staal and then sign Hossa, what's left? I don't think it's a good deal, but we'll see. If I'm Pittsburgh, getting there is not good enough. Now, you have to win it. And I'm not sure they're ready with their goaltending situation." > The Islanders are proof that quality usually beats quantity. In recent games against the Panthers and Penguins, the Isles fired 52 and 53 shots on goal—and lost both. Last week against the Rangers, they managed only 18 and posted a 4-3 shootout victory. Contributing: C.G., Ron Smith



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Sidney Crosby is back, and his Penguins are challenging for the top playoff seed in the East. Check out their progress at sportingnews.com.



The Falcons have their man in the front office.

Who needs Big Tuna?

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com

This might sound strange, but Thomas Dimitroff is a better fit to run the Falcons than Bill Parcells.

It is hard to avoid the feeling that Parcells used the Falcons for leverage in negotiations to become the Dolphins' new president. Dimitroff, on the other hand, seems 100 percent committed to Atlanta. He has a reputation for being a shrewd evaluator of talent, something the Falcons desperately need considering how poorly they have drafted in recent years. And Dimitroff, 41, has the energy to address a total mess, which is what the Falcons became last season.

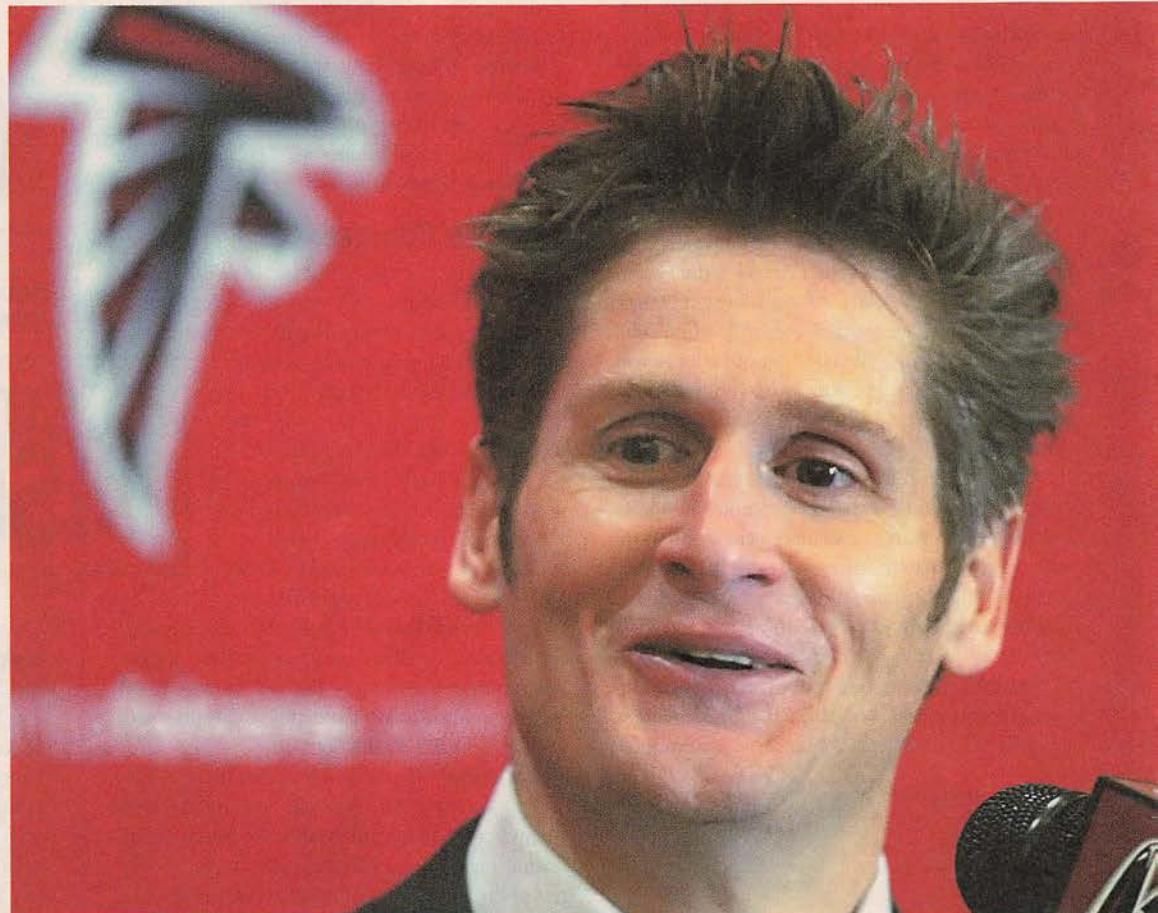
I suggested to Dimitroff that he was slightly crazy to go from Patriots director of college scouting to Falcons general manager. Why risk becoming the next guy who failed to fix the Falcons? Why not hang out in New England, possibly collect more Super Bowl rings and wait for a better offer?

"This is a challenge," says Dimitroff, "but by no means do I consider this daunting or impossible. I consider this a great opportunity."

The Falcons a great opportunity? Not something we hear often, but give Dimitroff credit for quickly giving the team a new identity. Adding free-agent running back Michael Turner was huge because it proved last year's turmoil didn't ruin the Falcons' ability to sign a coveted free agent.

Nothing Dimitroff does, however, will be as important as how he drafts. Of the 45 players selected by the Falcons since 2002, cornerback DeAngelo Hall is the lone player to make the Pro Bowl. Even before Michael Vick went to prison, the Falcons' talent base was eroding. Last season, the bottom fell out.

Free agents rarely build the backbone of successful franchises. Draft picks do. Arthur Blank has made mistakes as the Falcons' owner, but after flirting with Parcells, Blank did the right thing when he hired Dimitroff. And Dimitroff in turn hired Mike Smith as head coach—not a big name,



Dimitroff has an eye for talent, something that's in short supply in Atlanta these days.

but as the Jaguars' defensive coordinator he earned a reputation for spotting talent.

During Dimitroff's five-year tenure in New England, the Patriots drafted four Pro Bowl players—center Dan Koppen, guard Logan Mankins, defensive tackle Vince Wilfork and cornerback Asante Samuel—and 11 starters. Both Samuel (fourth) and Koppen (fifth) were late-round finds, the kind of picks who can turn a good draft into a great one. "A draft can make or break an organization," says Dimitroff. "It's important that we approach it that way."

Dimitroff will have plenty of ammunition this April, with the Falcons holding the

third overall pick, two second-round selections (Nos. 37 and 48) and nine picks total. The Falcons should take one of the talented offensive or defensive linemen available with the No. 3 pick, whether it be Virginia defensive end Chris Long, LSU defensive tackle Glenn Dorsey, Michigan offensive tackle Jake Long or USC defensive tackle Sedrick Ellis.

**Adding running back
Michael Turner was
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last year's turmoil
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a coveted free agent.**

similar circumstances, but lesser quarterbacks such as David Carr and Joey Harrington could not.

Dimitroff would be wise to find a veteran quarterback to man the ship for a year or two while he strengthens the roster and grooms a younger player to take over. Drafting a quarterback such as Michigan's Chad Henne or Delaware's Joe Flacco after the first round is one way to go. Or maybe Dimitroff will ring the Browns to see if they would consider trading Brady Quinn for a package of draft choices and perhaps even Hall, who is reportedly on the trading block. Moving Hall for the right player or draft pick wouldn't be a bad idea.

Of course, quarterback is just one of many roster spots Dimitroff must upgrade. Scott Pioli, the Patriots' vice president of player personnel, says Dimitroff is up to the task. "He spent much of his time with us preparing for it," says Pioli. "He's as dedicated to the game as anyone I know."

Fixing the Falcons is perhaps the NFL's toughest rebuilding project, but Dimitroff jumped at the chance. He was not the Falcons' first choice. But he could be the right one.

SN

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Should Michael Strahan follow Brett Favre into retirement? Read Clifton Brown at sportingnews.com to find out what he thinks.

speedreads

The Jets have improved, but they overspent in free agency. Their immediate future is tied to high-priced players who may not even get them to the playoffs.

The Eagles want more playmakers on defense, which is why linebacker Takeo Spikes was cut. He had no interceptions and no forced fumbles last season.

It is strange to see the Redskins so quiet during free agency. If owner Daniel Snyder has learned to be more patient, that is a good thing for the franchise.

Scouts love cornerbacks with size, and Tennessee State's Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie fits the bill at just under 6-2. Pencil him in as a first-round draft choice.

Apparently, Pacman Jones still doesn't get it. He should not talk about playing for the Cowboys, or anyone else, until he stays out of trouble long enough to be reinstated.

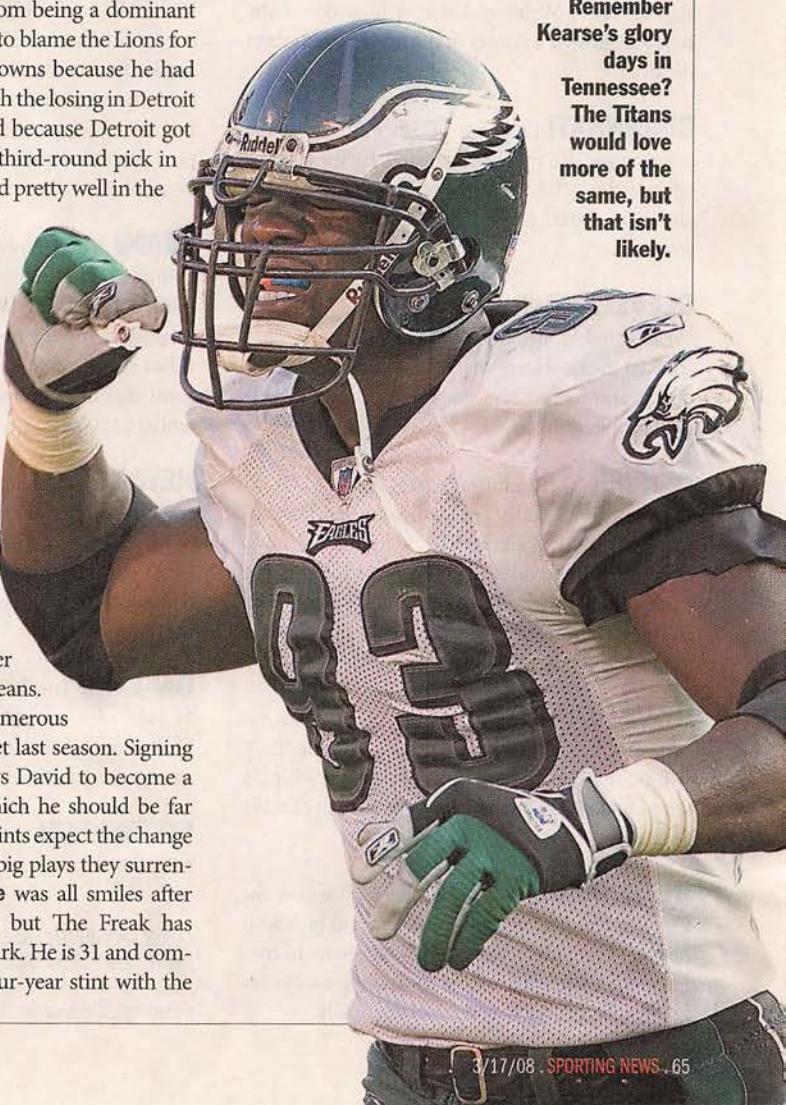
The Packers are not as nervous about QB **Aaron Rodgers** as some of their fans are. At the Scouting Combine, even before **Brett Favre** announced his retirement, coach **Mike McCarthy** said he had total faith in his young quarterback. Rodgers, 24,

learned plenty watching Favre for three seasons, and the Packers have a talented group of receivers. Before the 2005 draft, some scouts had Rodgers rated ahead of **Alex Smith**, who was drafted No. 1 overall by the 49ers, and some still believe Rodgers will be the better player. Think back to last season's game against the Cowboys, when Rodgers stepped in for an injured Favre and completed 18 of 26 passes for 201 yards and a touchdown. The Packers lost a legend, but the move to Rodgers doesn't necessarily signal a change in the NFC North. > There was significant trade interest in **Shaun Rogers** considering weight and consistent effort have been the only things preventing him from being a dominant defensive tackle. It's hard to blame the Lions for trading Rogers to the Browns because he had become too frustrated with the losing in Detroit to reach his potential and because Detroit got CB **Leigh Bodden** and a third-round pick in return. But the Browns did pretty well in the deal, too. **Romeo Crennel**, a player-friendly coach, believes he can persuade Rogers to get in better shape. If so, the Browns' defensive line will be far better with the addition of Rogers and DT **Corey Williams**, obtained in a trade with the Packers. > **Randall Gay** is not the best cover corner on the planet, but he is far better than **Jason David**, the starter he'll replace in New Orleans. David was burned numerous times and became a target last season. Signing Gay as a free agent allows David to become a nickel back, a role in which he should be far more comfortable. The Saints expect the change to reduce the number of big plays they surrender. > DE **Jevon Kearse** was all smiles after returning to the Titans, but The Freak has become The Question Mark. He is 31 and coming off an injury-filled four-year stint with the

Eagles. During his first three NFL seasons, Kearse averaged 12 sacks a year for Tennessee and was perhaps the league's most feared pass rusher. The Titans don't expect that from him now, but they'll be in trouble if he does not improve on his 3½ sacks from last

season. The Titans lost DEs **Antwan Odom** (Bengals) and **Travis LaBoy** (Cardinals) and DT **Randy Starks** (Dolphins) in free agency. Kearse will be counted on to pick up some of the slack, but the Titans' defense is worse now than it was before the changes. > Buccaneers coach **Jon Gruden** spent seven holes caddying for **John Daly** during the PGA Tour's PODS championship. Gruden and Daly met during a rain delay, and when play resumed, Daly offered Gruden the chance to carry his bag. Gruden stayed calm when Daly missed a putt, unlike Gruden's reaction when a Buc misses a tackle.

Remember Kearse's glory days in Tennessee? The Titans would love more of the same, but that isn't likely.



The Patriots got their man—now they must keep him healthy

The Patriots had only one move they absolutely had to make this offseason—and they made it. By re-signing WR Randy Moss, they are assured of opening 2008 with their explosive offense intact. One thing that might need to change is his number of reps. The Patriots got a full season out of him running 40-yard sprints on every other play, but at 31, he might not hold up another year if used that way again.

BALTIMORE The addition of Brendon Ayanbadejo will help the team fulfill one of its offseason goals: upgrade special teams. A Pro Bowl special teamer the past two seasons, Ayanbadejo demands double-teams, blows up wedges and still makes his share of tackles.

BUFFALO The team is woefully thin at cornerback after releasing Kiwaukee Thomas and not re-signing Jason Webster. There is little doubt the Bills will go after a corner in the first few rounds of the draft.

CINCINNATI Look for OL Stacy Andrews, the team's franchise player, to start at right tackle or left guard in 2008. He's a road-grading run blocker and a solid pass protector who is ready to blossom.

CLEVELAND The team is banking on Eric Wright developing into a No. 1 corner. He has showed the necessary speed, quickness and confidence, and he has kept his life in order after off-field problems in college.

DENVER The additions of LBs Niko Koutouvides and Boss Bailey could allow the Broncos to move MLB D.J. Williams back to his old weakside position. Koutouvides will get a shot to start in the middle. Bailey, who likely will be the strongside starter, has the cover ability to stay on the field with Williams in nickel situations.

HOUSTON The team will be solid at wideout now that it has re-signed Andre Davis. He likely will be the No. 3 receiver again, though with his speed and reliable hands, he is more than capable of starting.

INDIANAPOLIS This is a big offseason for CB Tim Jennings, a 2006 second-round pick who has yet to prove he can start. He's aggressive in coverage and run support, but that aggressiveness leads to his getting beat deep occasionally.

JACKSONVILLE The Jaguars hope newly signed CB Drayton Florence will help them match up better against the Colts' three-wideout sets. Florence, who likely will be the nickel back, is strong in press coverage and good at redirecting receivers.

KANSAS CITY Look for OL Brian Waters to have a big season at whatever position he plays. Waters has made the Pro Bowl at left guard but could move to center. He has the skills to play either position—he is a solid pass protector and blocks well at the point of attack.

MIAMI The Dolphins seem solid at running back. Ronnie Brown is recovering nicely from his season-ending torn ACL, and the new staff likes what it has seen from Ricky Williams. The team also has Lorenzo Booker, who showed potential in 2007.

NEW YORK Former Lion Damien Woody is a consummate pro, but he has been a guard for most of his career, so plugging him in as a right tackle is a bit risky. The team also signed Calvin Pace, who had a career-high 6½ sacks for Arizona after moving from 4-3 end to 3-4 outside linebacker.

OAKLAND The Raiders are convinced WR Javon Walker, who is coming off knee surgery, will be healthy enough to be the deep threat they covet for strong-armed QB JaMarcus Russell.

PITTSBURGH The team thinks it filled two holes with the signing of former Vikings RB Mewelde



With Moss doing his thing downfield, the Patriots have a chance to get back to the Super Bowl. Without him? No way.

Moore. He primarily will be a kick returner but also has the receiving skills to help as a third-down back.

SAN DIEGO QB Philip Rivers is rehabbing well from ACL surgery, but the Chargers remain concerned about TE Antonio Gates' recovery from toe surgery. The recovery time is four to six months, so Gates is expected back for the start of the season. But toe and foot issues sometimes linger.

TENNESSEE Changes are coming up front with the loss of LG Jacob Bell to the Rams and the expected retirement of RG Benji Olson. Eugene Amano, a spot starter in the past, should claim one of the spots. He is strong and has good hands.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

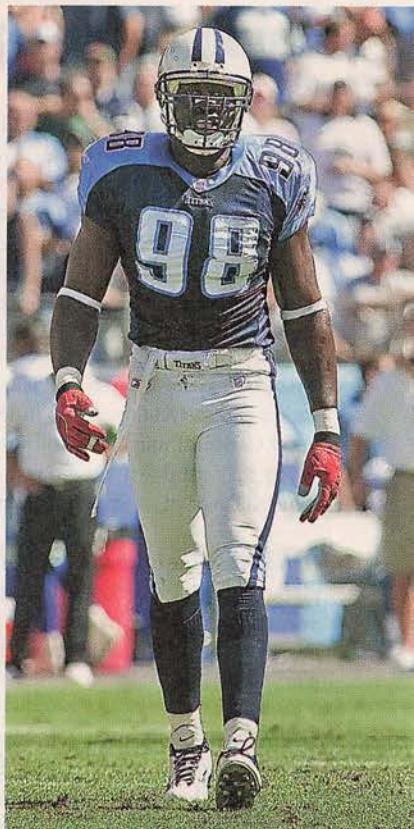


The Bengals' pass rush—all but dead last year—has a heartbeat

With newly signed RE Antwan Odom, 26, and quick LE Robert Geathers, 24, the Bengals, who were last in the NFL with 22 sacks in '07, believe they will generate significantly more in 2008. More important, they think they have a pass-rushing combo that will only get better.

The addition of Odom more than makes up for the loss of Justin Smith, who signed with the 49ers after producing two sacks in '07, because Odom is a much more flexible and athletic pass rusher than Smith. Odom (6-5, 274), coming off an eight-sack season with the Titans, is quick off the snap and gets good leverage because he gets under the pads of opponents. But he needs to improve his speed and hand movement in the offseason program so he can become more explosive.

Odom can't help but add juice to the Bengals' sad-sack defense.



OFFSEASON CONDITIONING PROGRAMS

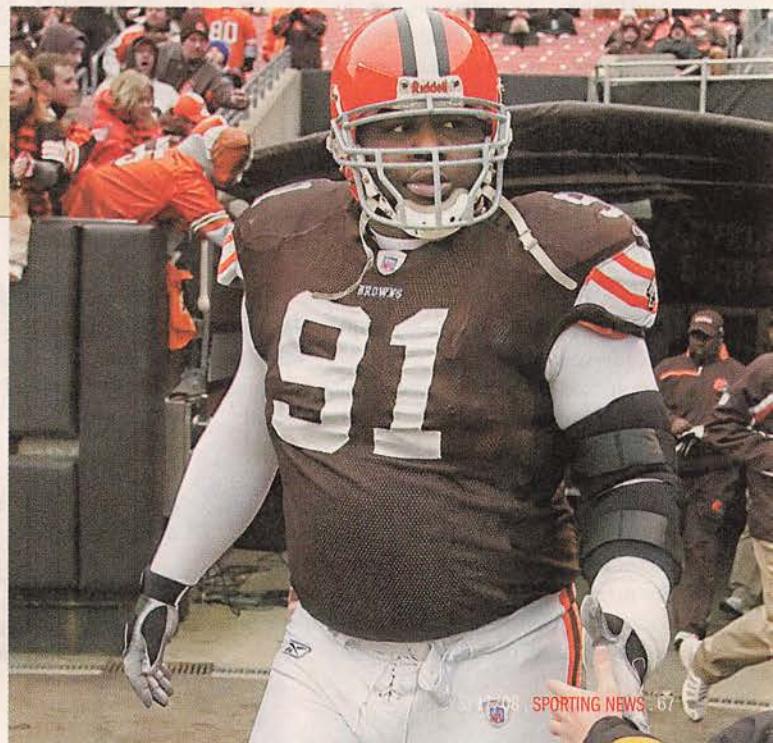
Team	Starting date
Baltimore	March 17
Buffalo	March 17
Cincinnati	March 24
Cleveland	March 17
Denver	March 24
Houston	March 31
Indianapolis	March 31
Jacksonville	March 24
Kansas City	March 24
Miami	Late March
New England	March 24
N.Y. Jets	March 17
Oakland	TBD
Pittsburgh	March 17
San Diego	March 24
Tennessee	March 24

The Shauns on the defensive line need to be steered to the vegetable tray. Weight is a concern for both newly acquired DE Shaun Rogers and projected starting NT **Shaun Smith**.

Ever seen the show *Extreme Makeover*? With a roster full of new names, competitions will begin to unfold everywhere from quarterback to linebacker.

A big emphasis will be placed on conditioning in an effort to prevent the late-game collapses by the defense.

Even though QB Vince Young won't be available much—he's in school—the team's receivers should get a feel for what new coordinator Mike Heimerdinger expects of them, from route running to using proper technique.



As new RBs come in, Alexander could be on the way out in Seattle

The additions of T.J. Duckett and Julius Jones could spell the end of Shaun Alexander's time in Seattle. And the team might not be done—the Seahawks are considering drafting a running back, too. Jones will compete for the starting job. He brings some quickness and explosiveness to the mix, but he is not viewed as the long-term answer as the feature back. That's why it would not be surprising to see the Seahawks also draft a back, especially if Oregon's Jonathan Stewart or Illinois' Rashard Mendenhall is available when they pick 25th. One of those backs could finally make Alexander expendable.

ARIZONA Travis LaBoy will play a hybrid linebacker/end spot, competing for time with Bertrand Berry. Coaches think LaBoy will be able to rush the passer in third-down situations. He comes with some risk, having suffered several concussions.

ATLANTA The Falcons replaced TE Alge Crumpler with Ben Hartsock, a four-year veteran. He is primarily a blocking tight end and will be used heavily in the run game. Hartsock is not in Crumpler's class as a receiver.

CAROLINA LB Landon Johnson will challenge Na'il Diggs for the starting weakside job. Johnson started at all three linebacker spots for the Bengals, and that was a large part of the Panthers' attraction to him. Johnson fits neatly into the Panthers' mold—he's fast rather than big.

CHICAGO WR Marty Booker's return does not solve the Bears' long-standing need for a No. 1 receiver, but he's more than a stopgap measure. Booker remains a durable performer who runs good routes.

DALLAS The Cowboys have discussed acquiring suspended Titans CB Pacman Jones. The Cowboys need a third cornerback, and Jones is far more than that. But the NFL has not said when Jones' suspension will be lifted.

DETROIT DT Chuck Darby won't replace the explosiveness of Shaun Rogers, but he will give Detroit excellent lateral movement along the line, which is important in the Lions' scheme. Darby has a great motor and won't take plays off.

GREEN BAY QB Aaron Rodgers has a quick release and very good accuracy. He has shown excellent scrambling ability, but he needs to learn he can make plays with his arm once he leaves the pocket. He still locks on to receivers too much and needs to let plays develop.

MINNESOTA The team has been unable to sign a free agent to fill its glaring need at defensive end. That puts enormous pressure on the club to come up with a starter in the draft. Although the Vikings say they don't draft for need, they might have no choice but to take an end such as Florida's Derrick Harvey at No. 17 overall.

NEW ORLEANS Dan Morgan will compete for the starting job at weakside linebacker after spending most of his time with Carolina in the middle (when he wasn't hurt). In his prime, Morgan was exactly the kind of tenacious, athletic playmaker the Saints' defense has lacked recently.

NEW YORK SS Sammy Knight likely will start because the coaching staff isn't ready to hand a job to Michael Johnson. Johnson showed an aggressive streak as a rookie but was also prone to mistakes. The Giants like Knight's durability, leadership and smarts. They also feel he will be a fine tutor for Johnson.

PHILADELPHIA CB Lito Sheppard probably won't be back. The team wants to acquire a good wideout, and Sheppard is its best bait. Teams might be leery of bringing him in. He is injury-prone, and he's not happy about his contract.

ST. LOUIS New LG Jacob Bell (6-4, 295) lacks bulk but is athletic, has great footwork and can get to the second level. His arrival is a big step in the

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



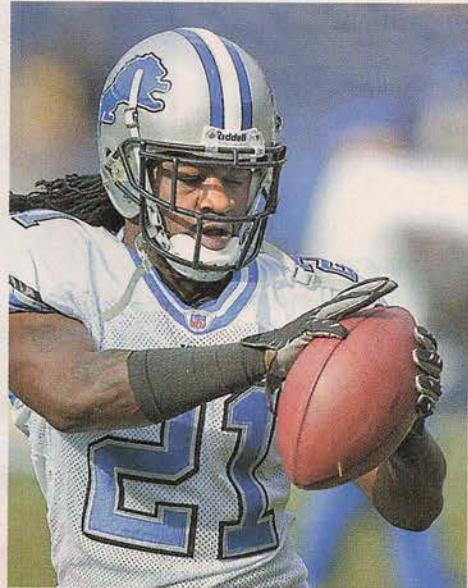
Jones will add some bite to the Seahawks' backfield, but they could be looking for more in the draft.

team's plan to shore up its line. Next up for the Rams: find a starter at center.

SAN FRANCISCO RB DeShaun Foster gives the club a viable backup for Frank Gore. Foster has the speed to get outside and can provide a change of pace to Gore's rugged, physical approach.

TAMPA BAY New backup QB Brian Griese was a good pickup. He struggles with efficiency, but he has won consistently and knows coach Jon Gruden's scheme. Better yet, Gruden knows Griese's strengths and weaknesses. Gruden can adjust his game plan to fit what Griese does well.

WASHINGTON WR Mike Espy could become a solid third-down receiver. The club needs someone to take attention away from Santana Moss and Antwaan Randle El. Espy has breakaway speed and is quick off the line.



Fisher's return at cornerback is key because he is strong at the nickel spot.

The Lions round out corner spots

Three weeks ago, the Lions' top four cornerback spots were vacant. Now all four are filled, and the Lions got all four guys they targeted. The last spot was filled by former Buc Brian Kelly, who is well versed in the Tampa 2 scheme and brings toughness, experience and leadership to the ailing unit.

Kelly will start alongside Leigh Bodden, who was acquired from Cleveland. Travis Fisher and Keith Smith, both of whom re-signed with the team, will be the backups. Coach Rod Marinelli believes Fisher was one of the keys to the offseason. Fisher was forced to start last year, but his real value is at the nickel, where his versatility shows. Fisher can play man-to-man in the slot and drop into multiple zone coverages. Just as important, he has the toughness to take on the run at the line of scrimmage.

OFFSEASON CONDITIONING PROGRAMS

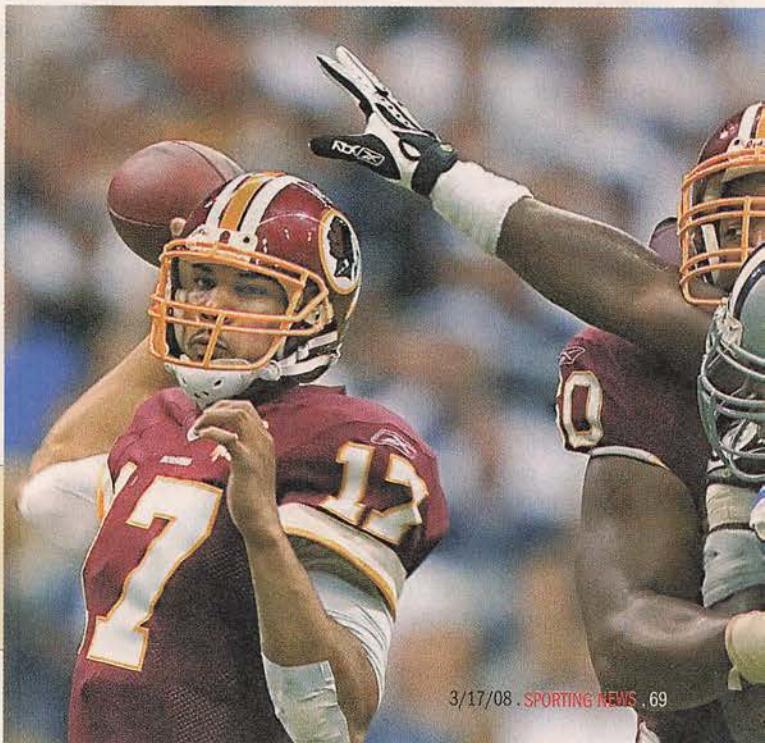
Team	Starting date
Arizona	March 24
Atlanta	April 7
Carolina	March 17
Chicago	April 7
Dallas	March 31
Detroit	March 17
Green Bay	March 17
Minnesota	March 17
New Orleans	March 17
N.Y. Giants	March 31
Philadelphia	March 31
St. Louis	March 24
San Francisco	March 17
Seattle	March 31
Tampa Bay	March 17
Washington	March 17

Quarterback Matt Leinart needs to assert himself as a leader.

The Cowboys have played their worst football in December and January the past few years, an indication they weaken at the end of the season. The team must solve what might be a conditioning problem during this offseason.

If Chris Simms doesn't prove he can make all the throws, he'll never make it to training camp.

Jason Campbell and the rest of the offense must become familiar with new coach Jim Zorn's West Coast system. Campbell has shown that the more time he has on the field, the more comfortable he becomes with the system.



Do the math: Three positions divided by four players equals a \$50 million rover and an easy solution to Mike Scioscia's problem.

Four Angels in the outfield

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

How about a little Gary Matthews-matics? That's Junior, of course, outfielder for the Angels.

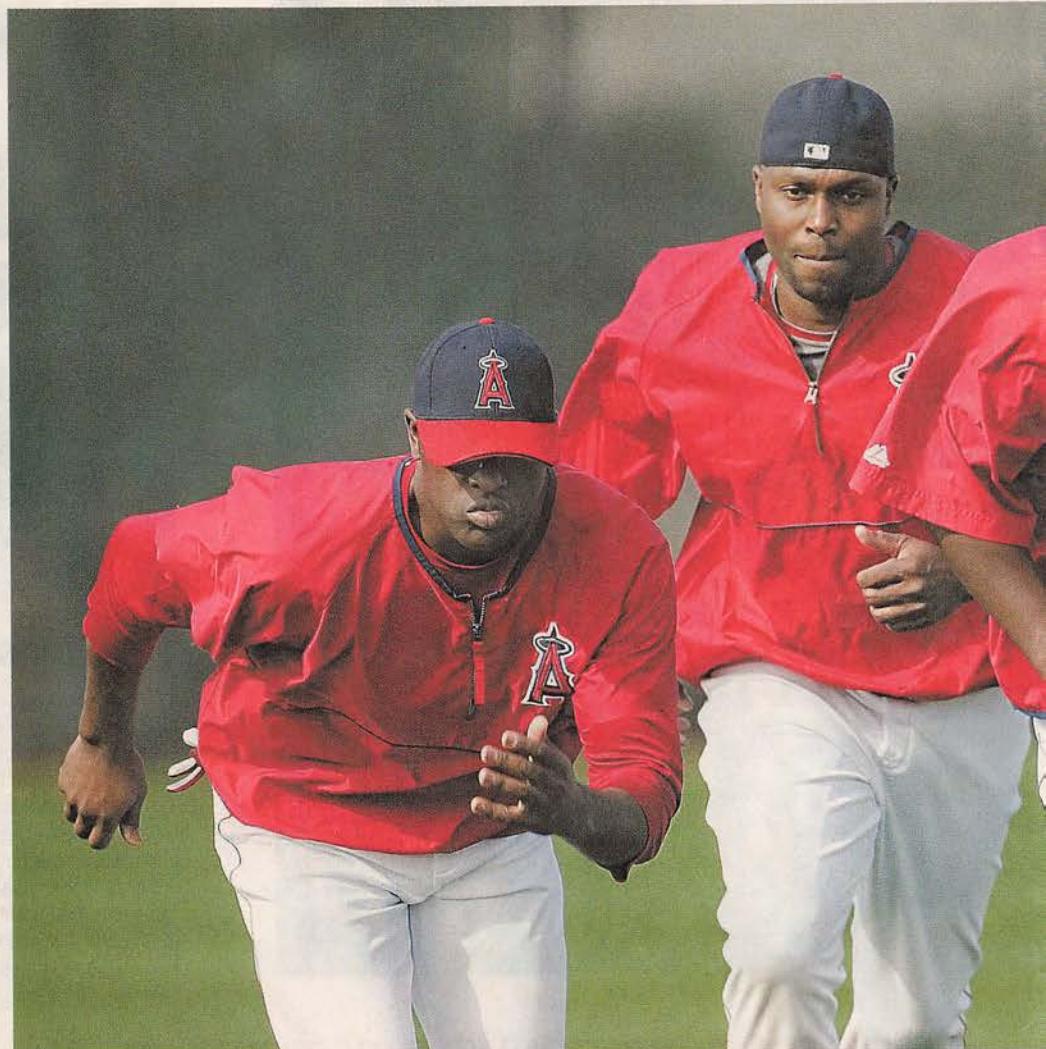
Let's start with .249, Matthews' career batting average in seven seasons. Add .313, Matthews' average during his breakthrough 2006 season. Take \$10 million and multiply it by five years—the length of the contract the Angels gave Matthews after that '06 eye-opener. Now, divide all that by the fallout of Matthews' name popping up on a distribution list from a company that was busted for selling performance-enhancing drugs. Subtract the revelation of a former teammate to the Mitchell commission that he found syringes in his condo after Matthews stayed there. Add Matthews' steadfast denial of having used HGH and the commissioner's decision that there was too little evidence to punish him.

Round it off with this: After Little Sarge's surge, he fell back to .252 last season.

So how does your equation come out? Cynics might already have Matthews tarred and feathered. Optimists find his denials plausible. These are the kinds of evaluations baseball fans have to make these days.

But for the Angels, it doesn't matter. They are paying Matthews. They need to use him. And depending on how much they use him, Matthews could be a key figure in the American League West race—and one of the A.L.'s most important players when fall comes around.

That's because when the Angels signed center fielder Torii Hunter in the offseason, manager Mike Scioscia did not fret about the gnarled outfield



The Angels have so many starting-caliber outfielders—from left) Matthews, Hunter and Guerrero—that they couldn't fit in this picture. Where are you, Garret Anderson?

situation that most envision. Scioscia saw it as sweet relief. He has been planning for months to use a rotation in which Matthews will provide

days off for Hunter, left fielder Garret Anderson and right fielder Vladimir Guerrero. "Those four bats have to be in the lineup," Scioscia says. "That is going to be a tool to rest some guys."

Matthews says he had no problem with the signing of Hunter and that he sought out Hunter before spring training to tell him that. "We needed another hitter in the lineup—he was one of the best ones there," Matthews says. "It made sense to sign him."

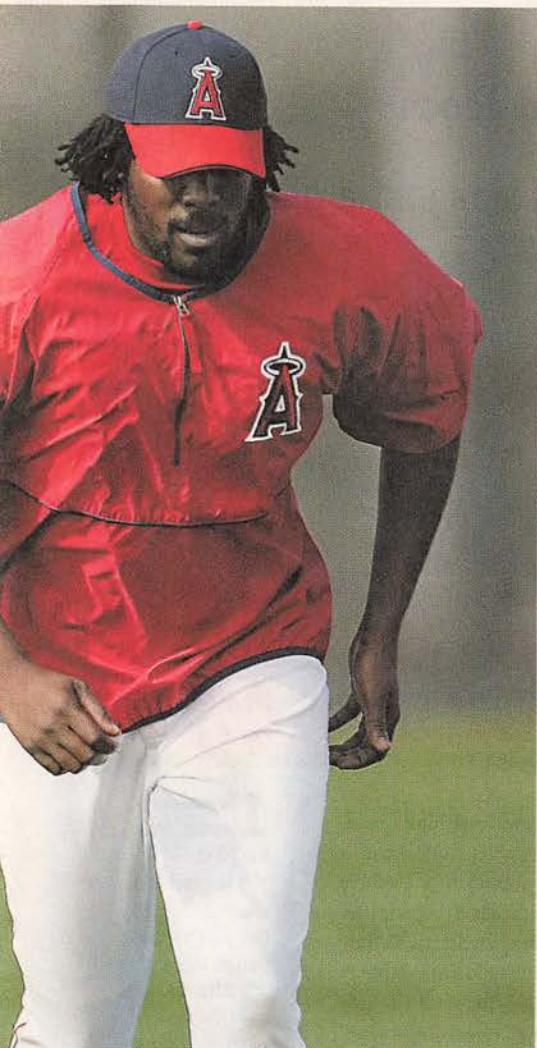
Now Scioscia will find time for Matthews—who is adept in the field but will be challenged to play all three positions—by sliding his outfielders into the DH role. Guerrero already has given a stoic proclamation on the matter. "No, no DH," he says. Anderson isn't so sure about the idea, either. Hunter, a seven-time Gold Glove winner, probably won't be asked to be the

Extras in name only

A good fourth outfielder is an integral part of a championship team, and the way they are used plays a big part in their success. Sometimes it's as simple as spot starts based on whether the opposing pitcher is lefthanded or righthanded, as these stats from last season demonstrate. Reggie Willits is a switch hitter; Jay Payton, Ryan Freel and Ryan Spilborghs bat righthanded.

	AB	H	HR	BA	OBP
Reggie Willits, Angels					
vs. LHP	126	42	0	.333	.406
vs. RHP	304	84	0	.276	.385
Jay Payton, Orioles					
vs. LHP	123	35	3	.285	.353
vs. RHP	311	76	4	.244	.267
Ryan Freel, Reds					
vs. LHP	112	16	1	.143	.172
vs. RHP	165	52	2	.315	.392
Ryan Spilborghs, Rockies					
vs. LHP	87	31	5	.356	.426
vs. RHP	177	48	6	.271	.332

Source: Stats LLC



DH much. But Scioscia is a strong enough manager that when a player—even Guerrero—says, “No DH,” he can say, “Yes DH,” and be done with it.

Besides, Scioscia knows a little mathematics, too. Last year’s Angels went just 14-14 in September, primarily because Guerrero struggled with a bad right elbow and Matthews suffered a knee injury. The offense struggled, scoring just 4.75 runs per game after averaging 5.14 in the season’s first five months. Anderson, 35, missed part of last season with a hip injury and, like the rest of his outfield mates, looked worn out when the playoffs began. Matthews missed the postseason altogether and, with Chone Figgins in his place, the team’s outfield starters hit .219 with one RBI in Boston’s easy sweep.

If Scioscia had entered that series with a well-rested, healthy outfield, it might have been different. At least the Angels might have scored more than four runs in the three games. Matthews can change that, no matter how your equation on him comes out. Scioscia has four outfielders and three outfield spots. As math problems go, that won’t be too difficult to solve.

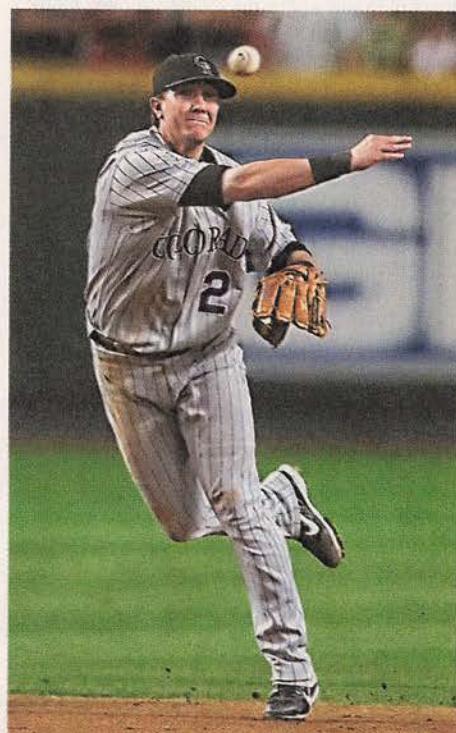
SN

The Rockies went on a \$90 million spending spree over the winter, which may sound profligate for a team proud of its cost-cutting recent past. But consider the caliber of players Colorado locked up for a total of 17 years: RHP **Aaron Cook** (four years, \$34 million); SS **Troy Tulowitzki** (six years, \$31.5 million); RHP **Manny Corpas** (four years, \$8 million), and RF **Brad Hawpe** (three years, \$17 million). There’s always a chance of injuries, but the Rockies have locked in a solid core for reasonable prices while avoiding arbitration. ► So far, so good for White Sox CF **Jerry Owens**, who has been solid defensively and good with the bat this spring. Owens stole 32 bases in 93 games last year, and the team is eager for him to win the center field job so it can get his speed at the top of the lineup. Owens hit .385 in his first four games. ► Last June 24, CF **Corey Patterson** bottomed out for the Orioles when an 0-for-2 performance dropped his average to .213. He picked things up from there, hitting .318 the rest of the way. At the time, Patterson claimed he didn’t make any adjustments, saying, “Sometimes, that’s just baseball.” But Reds G.M. **Wayne Krivsky**, in announcing Patterson’s signing last week, says scouts noticed he had cut down his strikeouts and focused on just putting the ball in play. If Patterson wins a starting job, top prospect **Jay Bruce** could be headed back to the minors. ► The success of Red Sox LHP **Hideki Okajima** last year prompted teams to scour Japan for quality middle relievers. The Rangers might have come up with a winner in RHP **Kazuo Fukumori**, 31, a 13-year veteran of Japanese baseball. Fukumori is talented but erratic, a pitcher who has bounced between starting and relieving. He suffered bone chips in his elbow last year that required surgery. But

>INSIDE DISH

Fukumori has been impressive so far and appears able to handle pressure situations. ► It’s pretty easy to overlook Rays RHP **Edwin Jackson**, who was 5-15 with a 5.76 ERA last season. But Jackson, who struggles with command, could get

a last-chance rotation spot. He didn’t allow a walk or run in his first five innings this spring, though it’s worth noting he had a 1.74 ERA last spring before starting the season 0-8 with an 8.20 ERA.



Tulowitzki is the center of a young nucleus the Rockies want to keep around for a while.

speedreads

The Red Sox have been a model franchise, and their fans are unendingly loyal. But would any sane-minded baseball follower be upset if this whole Red Sox Nation thing were put to rest? Forever?

I’ve been on the Rays’ bandwagon since November, but it’s getting crowded. It’s hard to be underrated if everyone says you are underrated—and it’s hard to be a sleeper if you’re everyone’s sleeper. Remember, this is a young team fighting to get to .500 in a very difficult A.L. East.

There are few young pitchers with as much talent as Nationals righthander Shawn Hill, who is only 25 games into his big league career. Unfortunately, if Hill ever reaches his potential, he won’t be young anymore. He had elbow surgery in 2005 and a surgical trifecta in November—shoulder, elbow and forearm. He will turn 27 in April.



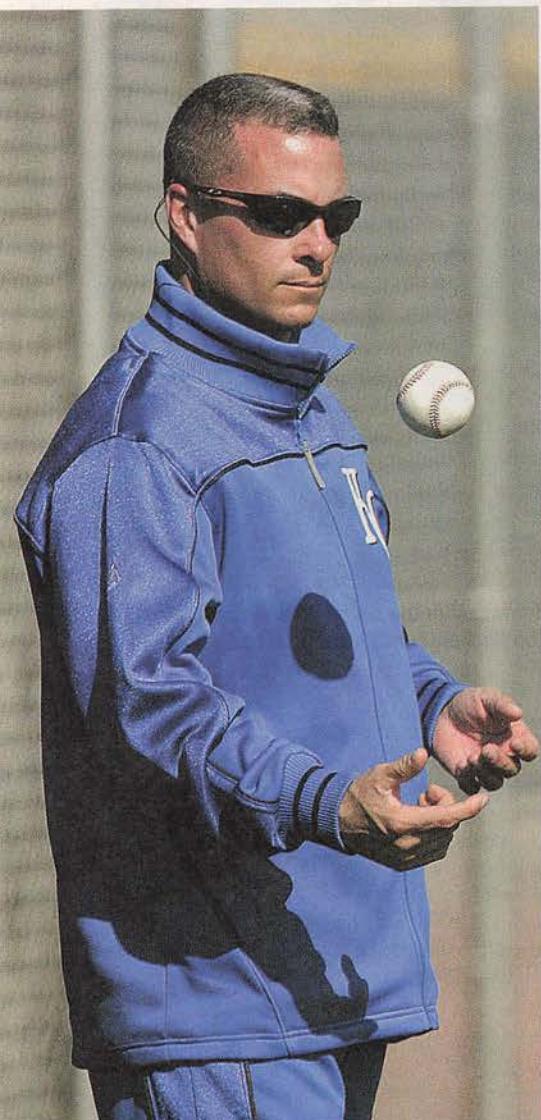
ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

This week’s travels take Sean Deveney to the Phillies’ and Braves’ spring camps. Check out his team analysis at sportingnews.com.

Moving forward by looking back

"Changing the culture" can be an onerous term. Former general manager John Hart wanted to change the Rangers and ended up running the franchise into the ground. Hart's approach banished all connections to the past, which is one reason Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan was estranged from the organization for several years.

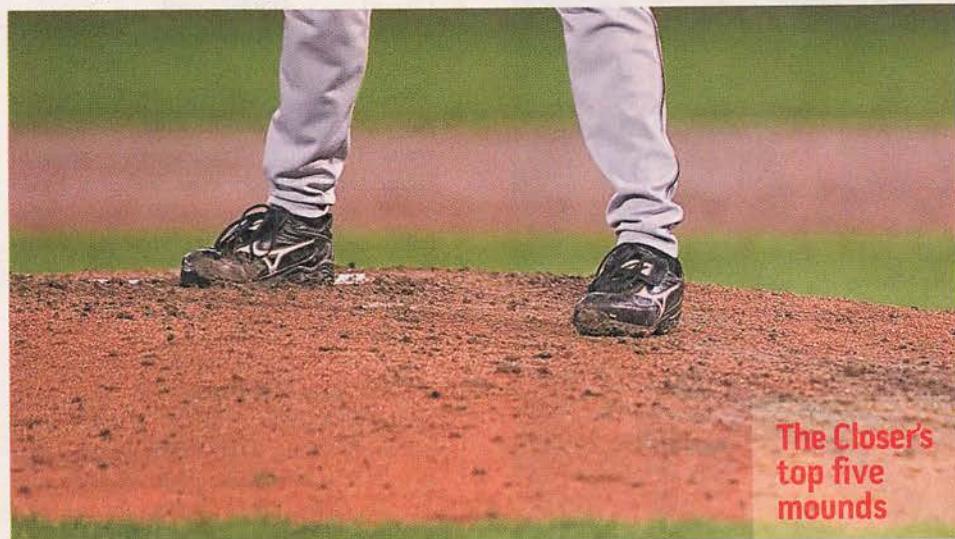
Royals general manager Dayton Moore has hit upon a more productive theme: reconnect with a glorious past. At the suggestion of J.J. Picollo, director of player development, the club has renamed fields at its facility in Surprise, Ariz., in honor of Royals whose numbers have been retired: George Brett, Frank White and Dick Howser. It's a small piece, granted, of a plan to renew pride in what was a model organization—but a step in the right direction. —Gerry Fraley



Moore wants fans to remember a day when the Royals weren't terrible.

THE CLOSER Todd Jones

And you thought the mound was just a pile of dirt



The Closer's top five mounds

The next time you check out a game in high-def, take a look at the mound. They are not all created equal.

Baseball is one of the few sports in which 90 percent of the game is played in two areas: the mound and the batter's box. Now I don't know much about batter's boxes except that hitters are just as frantic about the boxes as pitchers are about mounds. If hitters can't get their feet set, they feel uncomfortable. These guys are in such tune with their surroundings that if the box is too chewed up and they have to move even 3 inches, it can mess them up.

Mounds are the same way for pitchers. Back in the day, mounds were built with the home team in mind. The Astrodome, for example, was notorious for high mounds. And look at who pitched there: Nolan Ryan, J.R. Richard and Mike Scott—all tall, hard throwers who benefited from a high mound. Everyone knew the mound at Candlestick Park was the worst in baseball. Because of the wind, the mound would dry out. By the middle of the game, it was like you were pitching on baby powder. Huge craters would form, the kind that NASA would be proud to explore.

Shea and Dodger stadiums were others that would be doctored to accommodate the home team. No reason to alert Congress—I'm just saying the mounds weren't checked as much then as they are now. If opposing teams didn't say anything, it was just understood: You had to work on your angle to get the ball down in those places.

Usually, a bad mound is a result of a poor mix of

clay, dirt and sand. Pitchers can mess up a mound, too. Pitchers who land on their heel and then turn as they finish their delivery can chew up the dirt and make one of those craters. Because you can't ask guys to change the way they throw, as a reliever you have to be aware of who's pitching before you.

Few pitchers bother calling the grounds crew to fix a hole. Do that and you feel like you've got to strike out the next three guys on nine pitches because you've made a fuss and slowed down the game. Umps don't like the game to be held up for this reason, so most pitchers figure it's best to keep things moving.

Pitchers also aren't likely to start out at a different spot on the rubber if there is a problem. Move just 3 inches to the left or right and it's like moving across the street. Sure, Hall of Famers can paint the corners no matter where their feet start out, but for the rest of us, it's all we can do to get our outs. Asking us to move on the rubber is like asking Batman to ride shotgun. It's a weird feeling we don't need.

1 **Toronto.** Hands down, the best.

2 **Detroit.** I'm not saying this just because I pitch there.

3 **Atlanta.** Good pitchers deserve a great mound.

4 **San Diego.** It won't dry out because of the night air near the coast.

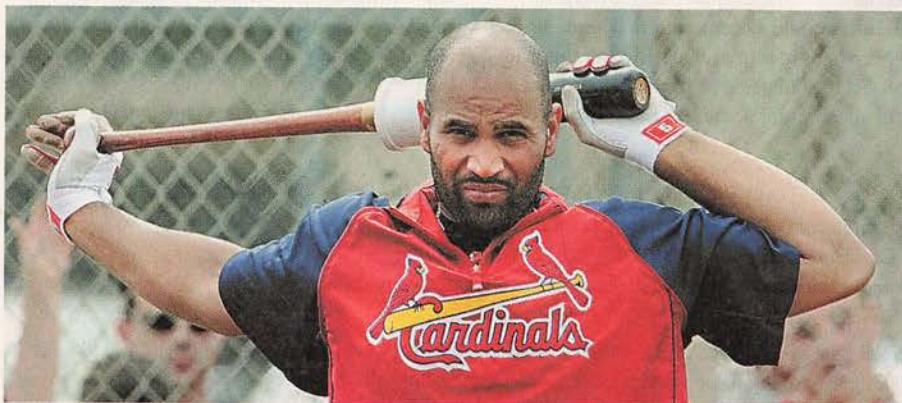
5 **St. Louis.** The groundskeepers know what they're doing.

Spring training isn't supposed to be this painful

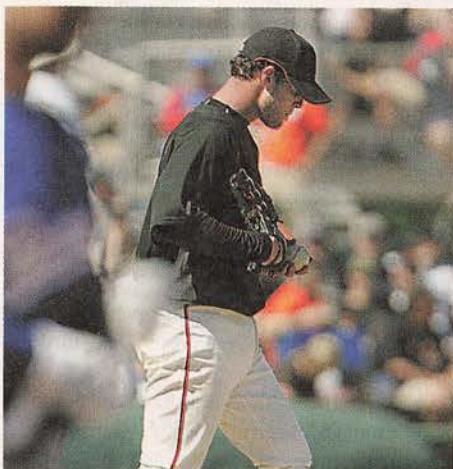
There wasn't much Mets general manager Omar Minaya could do but shrug and admit, "I've never seen anything like it." When the Mets suited up for a spring game last week, there were just two able-bodied members of the expected starting lineup on hand—third baseman David Wright and shortstop Jose Reyes. The other six regulars were out with injuries, which prompted manager Willie Randolph to wonder if he should break out his glove.

No contending team wants to deal with health problems in the spring. But two key veterans—first baseman Carlos Delgado, 35, and outfielder Moises Alou, 41—have injuries worth watching. Delgado's hip flexor would not be much of a problem, except that the hip bothered him all last year and was a factor in his putting up the worst numbers of his career. Alou underwent hernia surgery last week and likely will be out until May.

Bumps and bruises are common in the spring, and most are meaningless. But recent issues concerning key players bear watching.



Albert Pujols' elbow. Pujols doesn't want to deal with the kind of pain he endured last year, but he will attempt to get through 2008 without the surgery he needs on his right elbow. Losing him would devastate the Cardinals' lineup.



Noah Lowry's arm. The Giants' lefthander has been diagnosed with a neuromuscular condition that is causing pain and swelling in his throwing arm. That explains his stunning performance in two spring outings, the second of which resulted in nine walks (while facing 12 batters) against the Rangers—and three pitches that hit the protective screen behind the plate. Lowry, who was the Giants' top winner last season at 14-8, has been projected as the team's third or fourth starter. Manager Bruce Bochy is hoping Lowry can recover from the arm injury and tendinitis in his wrist by the end of April. —Sean Devaney

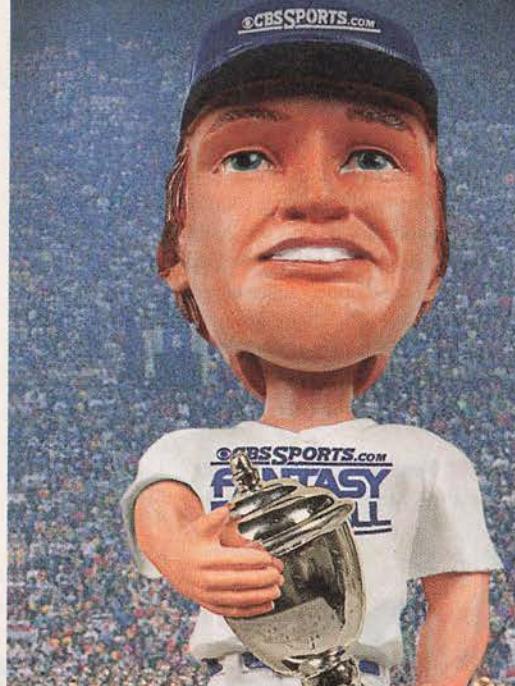
Kelvin Escobar's shoulder. The Angels quickly decided Escobar won't pitch in April; he's scheduled to start throwing this week, then will need some rehab starts. That is an extraordinarily cautious choice, but it makes sense because the Angels were stung by Bartolo Colon's shoulder injury last year. Still, if the MRI on Escobar's shoulder really is clean—as the team says—does he need to be out until May?

Rafael Soriano's elbow. The Braves are downplaying the soreness in Soriano's right elbow, but he did have surgery on it in 2005, so any pain is a red flag. Soriano was named the Braves closer after allowing just one run in his final 17 appearances last year. Atlanta has precious few options if Soriano has to sit out.

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE

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Some observations—and messages—from around spring training camps

The brighter side of pitching. The baseball world reacted with a fair amount of venom when lefthander Mike Hampton signed an eight-year, \$120 million contract with the Rockies in 2000. Then his sinker and ERA went north, arm and ego damage followed and Hampton became—unfairly—the poster boy for baseball's financial ineptitude.

Now 35 and in the last year of that contract, Hampton inspires hope for a comeback with the Braves after two-plus injury-plagued years. He struck out the first spring batter he faced on four pitches and allowed only one single in two scoreless innings in a first start that he called "promising."

His second appearance started well, but he left after suffering a slight groin strain, which the Braves said is not serious. If Hampton can come even close to old form, the Braves could steal the spotlight from the Mets and Phillies in the N.L. East.

Message? What message? The Mariners beat the Angels, 6-5, in a spring game last week,

and Seattle manager John McLaren declared that a message had been sent. His brand-spanking-new ace, Erik Bedard, went a whole three innings and the regulars played a whole six. "They are the team to beat, let's face it," McLaren says. "It was a spring training game with a regular-season feel to it." Angels manager Mike Scioscia's breathless assessment: "We got our work in."

Not quite worth it. Righthander Kevin Millwood tried a gradual buildup to the season in 2007, was not ready for opening day and finished with a 5.16 ERA and two stints on the disabled list. So this year, he increased his offseason work and reported 20 pounds lighter, only to encounter recurring problems with his right hamstring.

The Rangers had envisioned Millwood as an ace, thus his \$60 million contract. But they are learning the same lesson learned by the Braves and Phillies: Millwood is not a No. 1 starter.

The Rangers are facing a grim repeat of last season, when the rotation had the fewest innings (838) and highest ERA (5.50) in the A.L.

A little help, please. The Tigers are starting to understand that the great offense they constructed is only half the equation. Or even less.

The Tigers could become the first team since the 1999 Indians to score 1,000 runs. But that will be wasted if the bullpen isn't fixed. Joel Zumaya is out until midsummer because of shoulder surgery.



Hampton is still trying to earn that \$120 million.

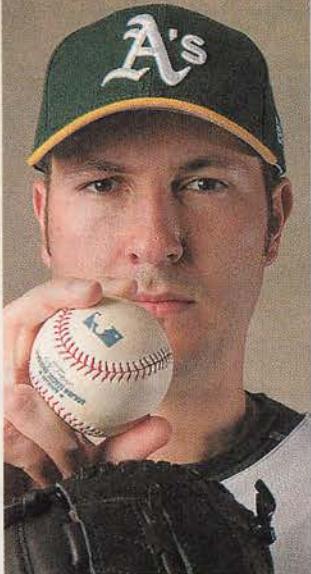
Fernando Rodney was in and out of the lineup last year and is hurt again. So how do the Tigers get to closer Todd Jones?

Manager Jim Leyland admits he is concerned, and with good reason. Last year, the Tigers finished seventh in the A.L. in save percentage (.677 (44-of-65)—and had the league's fourth-highest bullpen ERA (4.37).

—John Rawlings and Gerry Fraley

Q&A

Justin Duchscherer
A's RHP



The A's are retooling, and Justin Duchscherer is a focal point in this round of changes. Now that No. 1 starter Dan Haren has been traded and No. 2 Joe Blanton is being shopped, Duchscherer's move from the bullpen to the rotation takes on added significance.

SN: You've been an All-Star as a reliever, and now, for the first time since 2003, you're going to be starting. Are you happy about the move?

DUCHSCHERER: I've always wanted to start. Last year, I missed the last four months because of hip surgery. I talked to our manager, Bob Geren, about how the grind of pitching every day was starting to break my body down. Bob called me in early during the offseason and asked if I still wanted to start. He said he couldn't promise me anything, but a month later, they told me it would be better to start. Unless I'm really bad during spring training, I'm in the rotation.

SN: How do you think you'll like the routine of pitching once every five days instead of working out of the bullpen?

DUCHSCHERER: As a reliever, I start getting geared for a night game at 10 in the morning. I always anticipate that I'm going to be in the game. It was 162 games of that anxiousness, and that wore on me. Now I know when I'll pitch, so I won't have to get so geared up every day.

SN: How long does it take to adjust to the routines of spring training?

DUCHSCHERER: I live in Arizona, and I've been coming

in for five or six days a week for months. I feel like I'm in spring training all year.

SN: The A's are rebuilding for the first time since you've been here. What's that like?

DUCHSCHERER: It's going to be different with a lot of new guys, but Billy (Beane) does a good job of bringing in guys with good personalities. And from what I've heard about his trades, he got some good young talent.

SN: With so many new faces, how will the A's keep the loose clubhouse for which they're known?

DUCHSCHERER: It's going to continue because young guys don't know any better. Go to a team like the Yankees—there are some understood rules. You've got to show up at a certain time, and there's certain things rookies have to do for veterans. Here, nobody cares about that stuff. It's a good environment for young guys because they don't have to worry about who's going to get on their (butts).

SN: The A's are opening the season in Japan against the Red Sox (March 25). What are you most looking forward to about the trip?

DUCHSCHERER: The culture—the food, architecture, just being in a foreign country. Except for Panama, I've never been in a foreign country. —Stan McNeal

The hardest-working coaches will take a hit from a new recruiting rule that kicks in next month.

To the slackers go the spoils

By Matt Hayes

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He's trying to be diplomatic—he really is. It's just not in his makeup.

Pete Carroll competes. With his buddies in pickup basketball. With a visitor at Heritage Hall to make it out the door first and into yet another sun-soaked Southern California day. And, yes, at building the monster that is USC football.

Hold his tongue now? Not going to happen.

"I don't want to sound like a jerk," Carroll says, "But other coaches ... they're just lazy."

If you're Pete Carroll, how else can you look at the NCAA's new recruiting rule? Those who can't compete complain.

Two months ago at the NCAA convention, the SEC proposed legislation—and a majority of its coaches agreed—to prohibit head coaches from making off-campus visits during the spring evaluation period. It passed and kicks in next month, from April 15 to May 31.

The change was made—in theory—to help coaches avoid more frequent "bumping" incidents when coaches are not allowed to speak to recruits. Here's how the "bump" works: A coach goes to a high school to watch tape on a player and the player innocently walks into his coach's office at the same time and—*ta-da!*—we have a bona fide coincidence.

The NCAA claims there are growing enforcement issues with bumping and that it has become an unfair recruiting tool. Step back, everyone: The NCAA is on the case.

If the sport's governing body hadn't already botched enough, now it has decided to remove coaches from situations that may or may not be bordering on the possibility of gaining an unfair advantage. Seriously, who gets it more than the NCAA?

The reality is the new rule penalizes those who work hard and build relationships and rewards those who are, yep, *lazy*.

Nick Saban visited more than 100 high schools in last spring's evaluation period. Urban Meyer's spring jaunts are legendary, and Ron Zook once visited more than 70 schools in 30 days. See the common thread yet?

Those who work hard reap the rewards. Any coach can watch tape and see potential. The



Carroll will beat you—on the recruiting trail or the basketball court—because he'll outwork you.

difference is in the details: talking to high school coaches and guidance counselors and teachers early on and getting a feel for intangibles that don't show on grainy video.

It's a process; it's painstaking and competitive and can be the difference between playing in the Rose Bowl or spending the holidays in El Paso.

Instead, Charlie Weis will speak to Notre Dame booster clubs to pass the time this spring. Dan Hawkins will rent an RV and travel the state of Colorado to drum up support for his reclamation project.

And Carroll?

"I guess I'll work on my jumper," he says. Pity the fool trying to guard him.

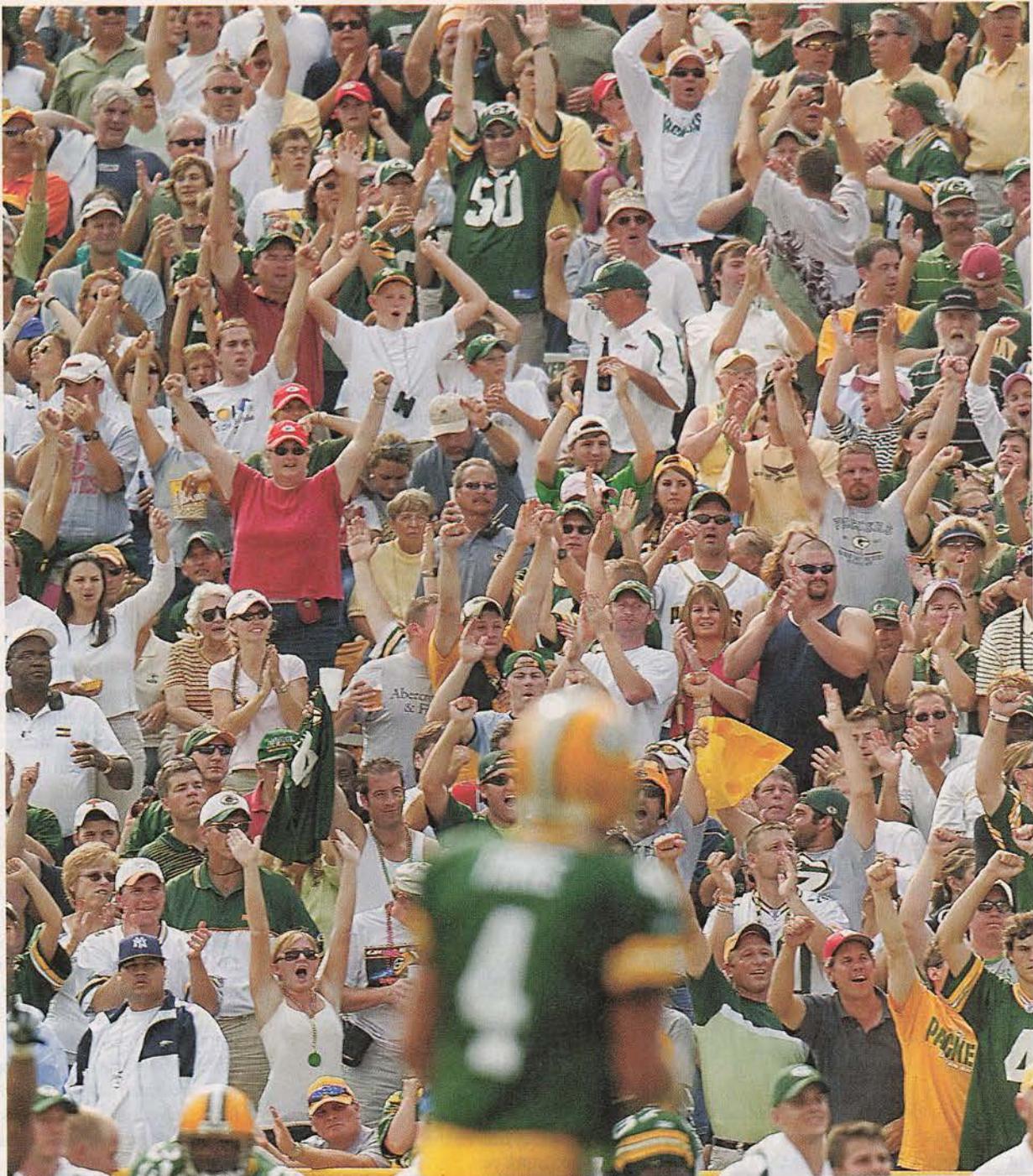
SN

>INSIDE DISH

Florida will use this spring to work on QB **Tim Tebow**'s management of the 2-minute drill. The Gators struggled last season when trailing in the fourth quarter and were exposed in key losses to LSU and Michigan. Tebow's passer rating in the first quarter last season was an unthinkable 219.72 (Oklahoma's **Sam Bradford** was the overall leader at 176.50) but plummeted to 126.24 in the fourth. The plan for the 2-minute drill this fall: run less, be patient and have confidence in the short and intermediate passing games. > **Dan Hawkins** wants his best athletes impacting the game, so Colorado's coach, who is entering this third season, will move G **Kai Maiava**—an SN freshman All-American last season—to a hybrid fullback/tight end spot this spring. Maiava weighed in the low 270s for much of last season but is athletic for his size. He'll likely drop to about 260 and be an impressive lead blocker for freshman RB **Darrell Scott**. > The North Carolina football program is still waiting to find out where RB **Greg Little** fits into the basketball team's plans. If Little makes the NCAA Tournament roster—and there's a good chance he will—it will significantly affect a critical spring for him. As a freshman last year, Little moved from wideout to running back midway through the season and showed power and vision. Coach **Butch Davis** says Little is a **Willis McGahee**-type runner—even though he still needs a lot of work at the position.

speedread

A sixth Penn State player has been suspended this offseason. If JoePa is trying to hang around a little longer in Happy Valley, this sure isn't helping him. Off-field issues are merely more leverage for the Penn State brass to suck it up and take a stand—if that's the plan.



EXPOSURE

Friends 4 ever

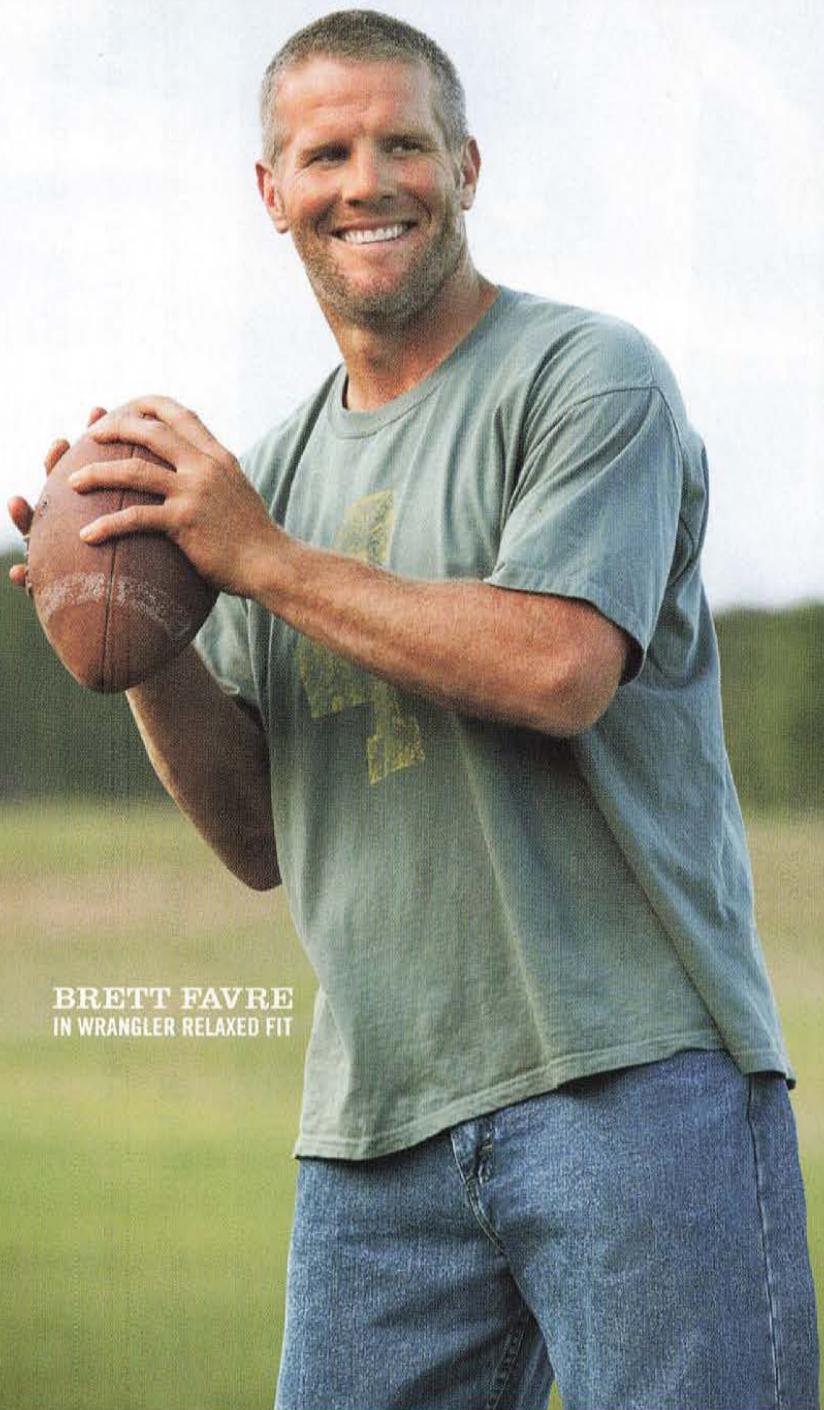
The greatest football players never die; they just fade away. And though the best fans in the NFL will be at a loss without the most popular human being the state of Wisconsin has ever known, they still believe in Brett Favre—it simply was time for him to call it a one-of-a-kind career.

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17 SEASONS
442 TOUCHDOWNS
61,655 YARDS

ONE BRAND OF JEANS.



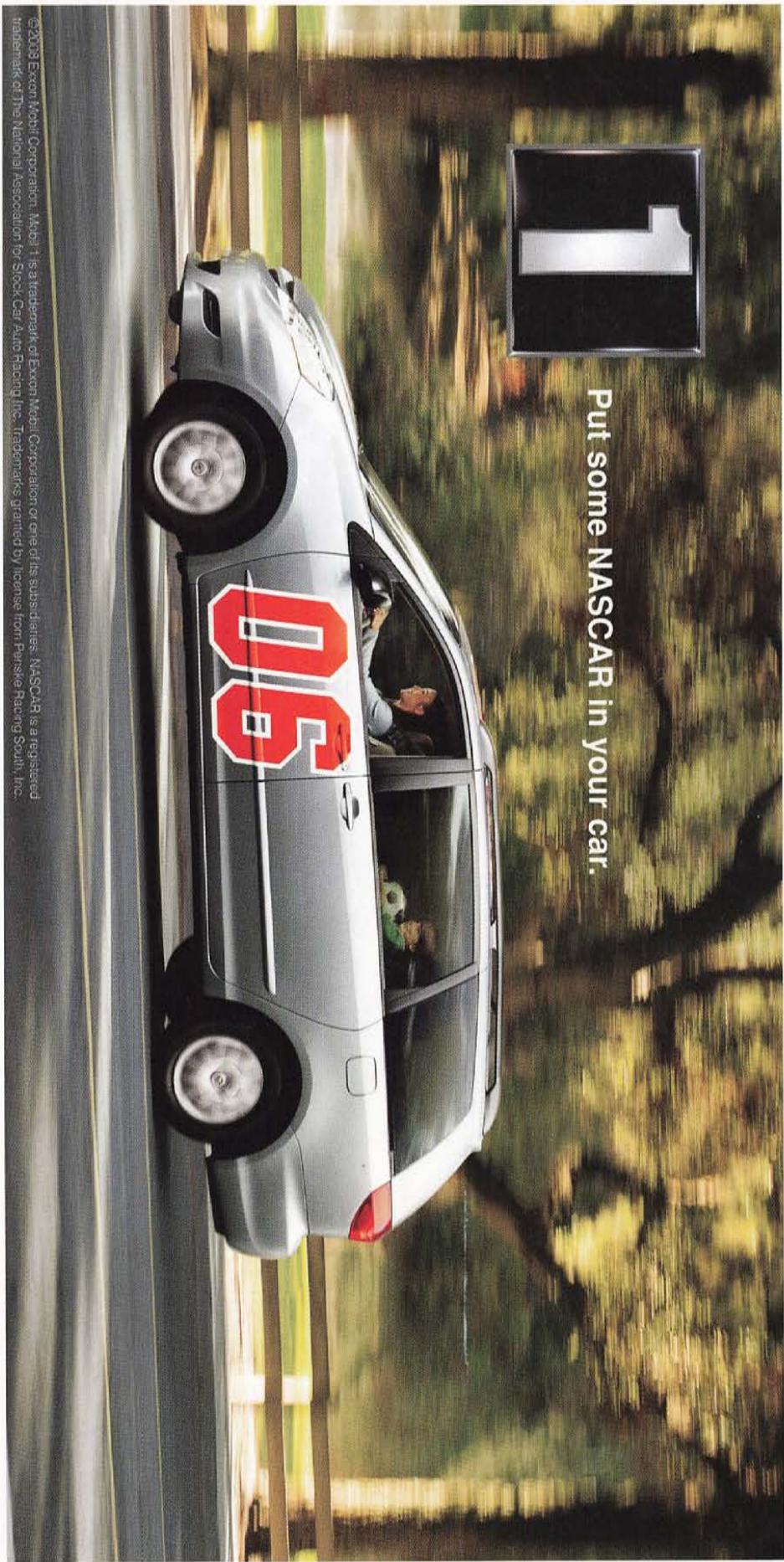
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